

# **KASAMA**

The Philippine Struggle For Health  
And Liberation Through The Eyes  
Of Two Belgian Doctors

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By Bert De Belder  
and Rita Vanobberghen

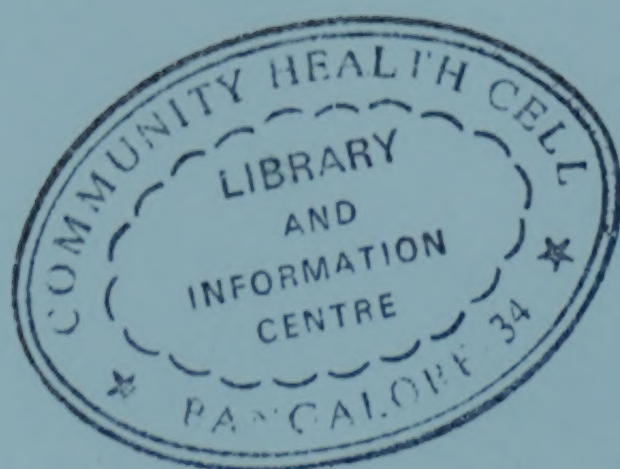




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## Preface

The writing of this book has been a long gestation, and its birth was preceded by a difficult labor.

But this time the roles were reversed, and that I found delightful. After all, carrying and giving birth to our three children had mainly been my job although Bert, somehow, had had something to do with it. This last product of ours is mainly Bert's work, although I, as his partner, have definitely had a contribution. The book contains also my articles from our newsletter, passages from my diary, and portions of my letters sent home or to my sister. And during the writing stage I took care of providing Bert moral support, a ready ear and at times serving him chocolate and fruit juice.

An easy pregnancy *Kasama* was definitely not. Normally you don't have to do much with pregnancy. It grows by itself. But with a book, it is a different matter. You have to constantly and patiently work on it to give it form. Writing it is just half the task; it is especially revising and polishing. And sometimes aborting and re-starting.

Every child that is born is a total surprise, but with *Kasama* we have had a say on how it should look like. With every step the incessant question and the difficult decision: "Are we going to include this in the book or not? Are we really going to talk about that? Is that relevant to the story?" More than eight years of stay in the Philippines had given us enough material to fill a number of books. But how far should we go in discussing the historical background and the political reality? How ponderous or digestible should it be? How much trivia and anecdotes would a reader want? How should we write about cultural differences in a balanced way?

There were more difficult questions. How much of ourselves could we give away, how much emotion to put in it, and would it then not become too sentimental? And were we not exposing the internal affairs of the Philippine revolutionary movement, which in its underground existence has been after all a target of sinister intelligence agencies not only in the country but also abroad? It is for this reason that we decided to change certain names of persons, personal descriptions and some names of places, without removing anything that would in any way affect the veracity of the story.

It took Bert some time before finally settling down to write, to be able to make of the book no academic treatise but a deeply experienced whole. Fortunately, there were many people who were willing to chip in their criticisms and corrections to improve the book's earlier versions. To them our sincere



gratitude. Our thanks also go to our parents and parents-in-law, for whom we have not always made it easy to remain supporting our work and commitment. The biggest help for Bert and me was undoubtedly the memory of my sister Hilde to whom we dedicate this book.

And finally we had to give this child a name. Our choice was *Kasama*:

Kasama - companion, partner (as in the Spanish *compañero*)

Kasama - comrade

Kasama - member of the New People's Army

Kasama - included, a part of

Kasama - accompanied by, together with

Sama ka - participate, come along, join

Sama-sama - altogether, united

**KASAMA** invites you to come along, not only for travel to the Philippines but also to the eight turbulent and fascinating years we had then. To a journey from Manila to the countryside, from the women to the guerrillas, from the medical consultations to the armed struggle.

Since being injured in 1985 while working as a volunteer doctor to the El Salvadoran liberation movement, I didn't have the opportunity to go to the guerrilla zones. But through Bert's stories I could somehow relive the life and struggle of the New People's Army. I am wishing the same for you.

**KASAMA** also invites you to participate. Now that our baby is here, we are of course concerned how it would eventually fare. We can only hope that this book would serve as an impetus for many in strengthening their commitment to liberation, both in the Third World and here. *Sama ka, kasama!*

Rita Vanobberghen  
Schaarbeek, 21 September 1997



## Introduction

Long was the road I had to traverse before I finally ended up supporting the liberation struggle of the Third World and involving myself in the Philippine revolution.

My first political coming-out was Flemish nationalism. At the Sint-Stanislas College in Berchem, there was this old-fashioned group of the Catholic Student Action<sup>1</sup>, all fanatics of the *Taalactiecomité* (Language Action Committee)<sup>2</sup>, who brought me to a protest action in Antwerp. That must have been in 1974. I was 14 then. I don't remember what the issue was, but the demonstration was held against former Prime Minister Tindemans. He was then visiting China, an occasion that popularized the slogan, "Leo, stay with Mao."

I knew enough of Leo Tindemans. His huge election posters had stared at us for months: "With this man it will be different." I never got to see what became different with him. But about Mao Zedong, who really changed the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese, I wanted to know more. In school, where I had a couple of progressive teachers, I would later write a term paper on Mao.

### El Salvador

In 1978 I went to Louvain to study medicine. I was then interested in politics, but found it better to study something "useful", instead of political and social sciences. A social occupation as a doctor seemed to be something, but the international situation would push me in the direction of the Third World. Soon after my first year as a medical student, the Sandinistas drove the dictator Somoza out of Nicaragua. The Tanzania of Nyerere was also interesting to me, a land that was chosen for the 11.11.11 Campaign<sup>3</sup> of Greater Louvain. I joined the student section of the Task Force Third World. Every other week we committed ourselves to having "hunger meals" and monthly we would pay a "development tax". The proceeds went to projects in the Third World.

On March 24, 1980, a shock wave hit progressive Louvain: the Salvadoran bishop, Romero, who had just been awarded an honorary degree in Louvain, was brutally murdered by a paramilitary death squad for daring to appeal to the military not to point their guns at the people. In an emergency meeting, the El Salvador Committee of Louvain was established to support the guerrilla

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<sup>1</sup> A Catholic youth movement

<sup>2</sup> A radical Flemish nationalist organization

<sup>3</sup> An annual fund-raising and educational campaign for solidarity with the Third World



movement, the FMLN. This was my chance to translate my intellectual and emotional indignation at so much injustice in the world into a concrete involvement, one that would go beyond the activities of the Task Force Third World. I became a member of the committee.

And we became El Salvador freaks in no time. Newspapers were zealously clipped. All the news and events concerning that little country were put on tape, and with little red flags we indicated on a map the step-by-step advance of the liberation war. Looking back, it is very ironic that we knew the name of even the smallest Salvadoran villages, but hardly did we have an idea where the Boel shipyard<sup>4</sup> was located!

## Genk

Nevertheless, my choice for the Third World was not yet totally firm. I was also still interested in having a social complement to my profession as a general practitioner in Belgium. A fellow student advised me to have my internship at the people's clinic *Geneeskunde voor het Volk* (Medicine for the People). I thought it all right to skip classes for once week, and so I left for far-away Limburg. It turned out to be better than what I expected: working in a group, the integrated approach, the use of patients' dossier and essential medicines, the attention given to the social context, and the cool Renault-4s which the Red doctors used to criss-cross Genk.

Yet in a way, everything was unreal for me. Or rather, I was a bit unreal for the reality. The people's clinic in Genk was in a workers' neighborhood and I had until then never encountered a worker face to face. As a working student I did work a few times at a cleaning shop. But hardly an iota of my outrage over the difference between the neat toilet seats we shined with kitchen oil in the office buildings of Brussels and the old-French "conveniences" for the workers of FN-Herstal and ACEC-Charleroi had remained in me.

I was also amazed at the political approach of the Medicine for the People. I had the impression that more copies of *Solidair* (paper of the Workers' Party of Belgium) were being prescribed than pills. But it was a kind of amazement in the sense of, "Well, there is something to it."

## Palestine

Eventually I would find myself very much at home with solidarity work for the Third World. As a third-year student I got the chance to help with nursing

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<sup>4</sup> A famous Belgian shipyard, now closed, where intense workers' struggles took place at the time



work at a makeshift clinic in a Palestinian refugee camp in South Lebanon for one month. This immersion internship was arranged through the PLO office in Brussels. With a classmate I ended up in Rashidiyeh.

Living and working among the Palestinians and Lebanese was an eye-opener. All the theories about oppression and imperialism became concrete. Barely a few weeks before, in July 1981, Israel had bombarded the Palestinian camps in South Lebanon and Beirut for days, and the people of Rashidiyeh had to stay day and night in underground shelters. Nine persons were killed. In the trauma department of the clinic where we worked, almost all the patients were victims of Israeli bombs, mortars, grenades and bullets.

Outside the camp, Palestinian fighters were being trained by military instructors from Bangladesh. Every Palestinian man in the camp carried a weapon, and that was how I learned to dismantle and assemble an AK-47, the well-known Soviet-made Kalashnikov. I refused to learn how to shoot, though, when my best friend Mahmoud, a young man especially trained to carry out underwater commando raids on Israeli territory, suggested that. That glow in his eyes whenever he spoke of the inevitable victory of the Palestinian people! All Palestinians, young and old alike, had this serene self-confidence that they would one day return to their homeland.

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. Operation Galilei sowed death and destruction among the Palestinian and Lebanese people. Rashidiyeh and other refugee camps were dismantled. With a vacation sweetheart, I went to see Costa Gavras' *Missing* that summer, a film about the bloody coup of Pinochet in Chile. But what I saw before me were Mahmoud and my other Palestinian friends. Were they being held captive by the Israelis? Were they suffering under the same gruesome repression? Were they still alive? In the theater I burst out into tears. My date could not understand what it was about.

My experience in Palestine and my growing involvement in El Salvador strengthened my choice to put my medical knowledge in the service of the people's struggle in the Third World. Marc "Jonathan" Ingelbrecht, who as a medical student left for FMLN areas in 1981, came to Louvain in 1983 to speak to us and encourage us. Doctor among the guerrillas: that seemed to me to be the pinnacle! The fulfillment of my ideal "go to the Third World" was already fundamentally changed. At first, it was purely humanitarian: to alleviate the suffering. Then I wanted to be just part of a "meaningful" project: small-scale, with the participation of the people, within the framework of the broader development strategy. And now I was seeing myself as a medical volunteer, either for liberation movements (the FMLN, the PLO), or for countries that had already been liberated (Nicaragua).



## Chile

In my internship year, the medical faculty of the Catholic University of Louvain offered us the possibility of staying in Latin America, Zaire or India for eight months. I landed in Chile, a country that captured everyone's else's imagination following the socialist-oriented experiment of Salvador Allende in the early '70s and the subsequent dictatorship of Pinochet who could have passed as one of the characters created by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I was able to accept the idea of working in a country run by a murderous military dictatorship by my firm resolve to establish contacts with the Chilean opposition.

When I arrived in Chile with two others in November 1983, the regime still appeared to be a block of granite; not a single political party was allowed. But the fall of the military regime in neighboring Argentina had somehow stirred the people. Every month there were protest actions and strikes that I attended. The Chilean security force, the hated carabineros, responded to these actions brutally. In one demonstration I participated in, a student was felled by police bullets.

During our free time, we would visit a coal mine and a steel factory. We became friends with a family in a workers' community, to Hugo and Andrea and their children. Together with a young doctor, Lautaro, we gave lectures on health to union members.

As we got to know Hugo, Andrea and Lautaro better, they started showing their sympathy for the resistance against the dictatorship, the Resistencia, which was being led by the MIR, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left. Lautaro made it clear that he would treat wounded members of the resistance every now and then. A doctor that I looked up to.

In the course of the following months, the political parties--from Christian democratic to communist--reemerged one by one, albeit very cautiously. In the very politicized atmosphere of those days, practically all my co-students showed their true political colors. I noticed that my best friends had studied Lenin. They either belonged to the Communist Party or just kept silent about their affiliation. The latter were members of the MIR, the only party that remained underground and one that carried out small-scale guerrilla operations. The resistance regularly attacked outposts of the carabineros, and the R of the Resistance was daringly visible in the neighborhoods. One day, while sitting in a bus, I got from Hugo a rolled-up newspaper. Upon getting home, I opened with a pounding heart an issue of the MIR magazine. My first clandestine act!

My Chilean friends asked me: "Now you tell us about your Party in Belgium." I was tongue-tied. They found it hard to understand how I could take



Left standpoints and be in solidarity with their struggle without being a member of a revolutionary party.

I was back in Belgium when we received the report that our friend Hugo had been arrested. For three months he was detained in a prison camp in San Pedro de Atacama, in the middle of the salt desert of northern Chile. Together with fellow Chile interns and solidarity workers, we started a campaign for Hugo's release. We wrote articles and petition letters, raised money for Andrea and the children, requested politicians for their support, approached human rights organizations.

The thought of Hugo in captivity hounded me. I was constantly afraid that he would be tortured by Pinochet's hatchet men. One night, at a party, everything became so unbearable that I cried on the shoulders of my girlfriend Marleen. My fellow party-goers would probably have thought that it was about an acute attack of love depression.

Months later, when we were finally able to bring Hugo, Andrea and the children to Belgium as political refugees, it would appear that our Chilean friends had found a home in the Workers' Party.

## Rita

During our examinations for the last year of medical study, in June 1985, we were dumbfounded to hear the news that Dr. Rita Vanobberghen had been shot in El Salvador. She, too, had decided to provide medical care to the FMLN and the people in the liberated areas. When she went to a nearby guerrilla camp to return some materials used for an operation, she was shot from a helicopter of the Salvadoran government's army. Seriously wounded in the hip, she was first given medical treatment by the *brigadistas* of the FMLN and through the intervention of the International Red Cross was brought to a hospital in Costa Rica, and then repatriated to Belgium. I had known Rita since my student days in Louvain, where she was two years ahead of me in the medical faculty. Incidentally, I also followed with her a training course given by ITECO for prospective development workers.

I would visit Rita during her long recuperation period at home. Her unshakeable optimism, her steadfastness and her inner strength immediately struck me. There was hardly any hope at that time that she could walk again, but she had already planned some information evenings where she would address people from her stretcher.



## Michael

After a six-month study of tropical medicine in Antwerp, I could start working part-time as a family physician in the people's clinic of Medicine for the People in Deurne. Doctors Lieve Seuntjens and Dirk Van Duppen were working that year in Lebanon, where they experienced the terrible siege of the Palestinian camps. Harrie Dewitte, another doctor of Medicine for the People contacted me in Deurne. The plan to establish an organization, Medical Aid for the Third World, matured. The objective was to support projects of liberating medical care in the Third World and to send health workers there. The first task was to find a replacement for Michael De Witte, another Belgian doctor working for the Salvadoran guerrillas, who was urgently in need of a vacation. Would I be interested in that?

So there I was . Working for the guerrillas was indeed my ideal, but now that there was a concrete request to help in a life-and-death situation of the Salvadoran liberation struggle, I was being overwhelmed with doubts. I promised Harrie that I would seriously consider his suggestion. I went to discuss it with Rita Vanobberghen, whose hip injury so unexpectedly improved that she was now trying to walk again with the help of two crutches. Rita neither encouraged nor discouraged me. She warned that it would not be easy, but she thought I could do it. I myself continued to doubt. I had the feeling I was not yet ready for it.

I felt the need to provide myself with a deeper foundation for life's choices that came my way and with which I had difficulty deciding. And so it happened that I met Rita anew. We were once again attending a course, but this time the issues would be handled on a much deeper level. We were given a Marxist framework of analysis and we had group discussions on the history, the concrete present-day situation, the different political currents, political economy, revolution in the Third World and here, socialism and the need to have a strong organization.

And there was even time for a little romance during this membership course of the Workers' Party, for such it was indeed. Rita and I were also studying each other and it did not take long before we decided to leave together for the Third World.

On February 7, 1987, Michael was killed in El Salvador. With a feeling of guilt, I thought: "It actually could have been me, ". Rita and I were in the midst of organizing a memorial celebration for Michael in Antwerp, which was filled by 500 people, for a memorable night.



## The Philippines

Rita and I wanted to leave, but where to? El Salvador was out of the question. Rita was on the blacklist there. We looked for alternatives, with the agreement that we would immediately exchange it for El Salvador upon the victory of the guerrillas there.

At that time the Philippines was in the news every day. Marcos the dictator had been overthrown. The armed struggle and the legal people's organizations had grown tremendously and stood with much prestige.

The organization *Bevrijde Wereld* (New World) offered us to join a Philippine non-government organization for liberating health care. It concerned a training project of the Council for Primary Health Care on the island of Samar. That was one tempting offer that Rita and I could not afford to let pass.

We started studying, for we wanted to be well prepared. We had to take in everything about Philippine health care that we could lay our hands on. We also prepared ourselves politically. We ploughed our way through *Philippine Society and Revolution*, the book written in 1970 by Amado Guerrero. Everyone knew that that was the nom de guerre of Jose Maria Sison.

In 1968 Sison led in the re-establishment of the Communist Party, which a year later launched the armed struggle by forming the New People's Army (NPA). In 1977, when the NPA was spread all over the archipelago, Sison was arrested. He was detained for more than eight years, a great part of those in solitary confinement.

In April 1987 Joma Sison was in Belgium for a series of lectures. It was an ideal opportunity for Rita and me to prepare ourselves better for the Philippines.

With the help of friends and family, Rita and I put up a support group, with the aim of giving out information about the Philippines and our health work and to gather financial support for our project. We started publishing a quarterly newsletter.

In October 1987, two staff members of the Council for Primary Health Care, Dyeri Andamo and Maris Presto, were in our country as guests of the 11.11.11 Campaign. Finally, Rita and I could hear all the nitty-gritty about our project. We were now completely ready for the Philippines.

The Filipinos had touched us not only by their clear analysis but also by their optimism. According to Joma Sison, the victory of the Philippine revolution was just a matter of years. When Rita and I left for Manila on



October 27, 1987, an idea stayed in the back of our minds: "If we stay there for about five years, chances are that we would also experience that victory."



## Chapter One

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### Confrontations and Contrasts 1987-1988

#### Manila

October 28, 1987. After an eighteen-hour flight, with stop-overs in Dubai, Bombay and Bangkok, the Boeing 747 lands with one tiny jolt. All the Filipino passengers start to clap. Rita and I are also excited. Destination: Manila. Reached! The heat overwhelms us on our way out. At the airport hall a musical band welcomes the passengers. Fetching us is Roger Dhaenekint, a Belgian development worker who has been in the Philippines for ten years now. He is in the company of two Filipino women who introduce themselves as Delen and Gemma, members of the Council for Primary Health Care.

Hot, polluted, horrible traffic: this is Manila, the city of millions. The jeepney is king of the road here. This converted and often originally decorated jeep is Manila's most important means of public transportation. You get on a jeepney from the back part, almost crawling so as not to bump your head. The passengers sit opposite each other in two rows of from seven to ten persons, depending on the size of the vehicle, like sardines in a can. Because there are no windshields, it is not difficult to get filthy from all the fumes. The roar of its motor is made worse by the driver's screaming stereo. The jeepneys are completely different from the expensive private cars that have air-conditioning and tinted windows. Every time they back up, they whistle a nice little tune.

You pay by giving a few pesos to the driver--while the ride is going on!--and telling him your destination. While continuing to drive, he turns to you, because apparently, he has not understood you well. And then still continuing to drive, he gathers coins and gives you your change. There are practically no designated stops. You may alight wherever you want. You say *para* to make the driver stop the vehicle. Or you knock once on the roof or make a *psssst* sound. But beware. In some jeepneys you will find this sticker: *Para* is for people, *psssst* is for dogs.

It is impossible to say how many lanes the broad avenues of Manila have. Lanes are simply non-existent, and the cars and buses twist and turn through each other. The big avenue belt is called EDSA, where the jeepneys are not allowed to ply. It is the busses, though, that make the road unsafe.



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The bus is a perfect hunting ground for those who want to earn some extra money. Hawkers of chewing gum and cigarettes (sold per piece) jump on and off the running bus. Beggars crowd around the passengers. Striking workers come to ask for financial support because they have had no income for months.

People are certainly ingenious in creating jobs. While the mother washes somebody else's laundry or tends a sari-sari store (a small retail store) at home, the children scour the streets. A street hawker is no enviable job for children. Exposed to stifling smell of car fumes and the dangerous traffic the whole day, they sell newspapers or those sweet-smelling sampaguita flowers that are used to honor the Holy Child.

In the sari-sari store you can buy almost everything that is affordable by a poor man's budget: bouillon cubes per piece, individual sachets of coconut oil, a small piece of margarine, or kerosene in a Coca-Cola bottle. You can also buy medicines by the piece. "Three aspirin tablets? That is 1.50 pesos, madam."

At busy crossroads and at bus stations, the small food and drink wagons crowd each other. Here you can get rice with a viand, *ulam*, for a small amount of money that would definitely not suffice if you yourself cook. As snack you can eat roasted chicken legs, including toes and all called Adidas; or chicken intestines that are rolled up, like cassette tapes, on a small stick, called Betamax.

Even members of the middle class are compelled to go into small business in order to augment their meager income. T-shirts, Triumph bras and even plots of burial ground are sold to neighbors, colleagues at the office, or to students. You can pay in installments, even for an Eternal Life Insurance plan.

### On A Contrast Tour

Grinding poverty is ubiquitous, but the elite do not hesitate to flaunt their wealth ostentatiously. You can find here splendid golf courses that are constantly sprinkled with water to maintain its greenness, while a family of itinerant beggars living on a footpath next to one has to buy their water per jerrycan. The upper class travels in luxurious Pajero landrovers, whose tinted windows remain closed to the outstretched hands of the beggar or the young girl selling flowers. For those who can pay, everything is for sale in the shopping centers. In the business district of Makati, one can buy European meats, cheese and chocolates. Brussels sprouts are available for 65 pesos per half pound.

October 30. To familiarize ourselves with the concrete social contradictions of Manila, our host organization, the Council for Primary Health Care (CPHC), invites us for a "contrast tour". We visit the infamous Smokey Mountain, the giant garbage dump of Manila on which and from which 6,000 people live in a



nauseating malodorous condition. Garbage trucks come and go, and even before they come to a halt, children jump on them and, armed with big and frightening hooks, rummage through the garbage, looking for anything of use. Anything that can be sold for recycling—plastics, cans, and even animal bones—is neatly bundled up.

A group of men approach us, waving a piece of paper. Someone from the neighborhood has died and a collection is being made for a simple burial. But first of all, the corpse has to be brought out of the hospital. That is only possible if all the hospital bills are settled first. The amount is 6,000 pesos, which is already equivalent to two-month's salary! Bewildered, we give the men 100 pesos.

I feel so ashamed because I am white, rich, well-fed and neatly dressed. And relieved as we leave Smokey Mountain behind.

The literal nausea caused by the stink of Smokey Mountain becomes a figurative abhorrence as we drive along the chic residential areas of Makati. The contrast cannot be starker. Walls and guard posts hermetically protect the neighborhoods of Forbes Park and Dasmariñas Village. No beggar comes in here! We are not allowed to enter, either. The checkpoint bar only goes up if you can tell the guard your destination.

The society pages of newspapers are littered with stories from these neighborhoods. Every newspaper devotes a full page at least once a week for such tidbits as to who went out with whom to which party, who wore clothes of which couturier, the whims and caprices, love affairs and divorces, the make-up and jewelry of the country's most beautiful. A real who's who of the country's beau monde.

#### **At Sister Luisa's**

Temporarily we move in with our compatriot Roger who shares a small apartment with Sr. Luisa, a Dutch nun. Both come from a small group of progressive Christians that has branches in Chile, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. They have been staying in the Philippines for more than ten years now. Roger, in his forties, is a tall guy with graying hair and moustache. He is a sociable talker and a social drinker, too, as we notice quite soon. He is active in the trade union organization, KMU, the May First Movement. He is always busy, but is always ready to help us.

Luisa, a plumpish woman in her fifties, is rather listless. She works for the women's organization GABRIELA, named after Gabriela Silang, the first woman freedom fighter against the Spanish colonizers who was executed in



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1763. GABRIELA also stands for General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action. Inventing long acronyms with a meaning is a national pastime in the Philippines. This leads to the craziest of combinations. A transport union is called RADIATOR or Regional Alliance of Drivers and so on, and the rightist military rebels under Gringo Honasan named a coup plan against President Aquino as Remove Aquino Movement Before October or RAMBO. The name used by high-society women who put up a charity organization to care for the wounded soldiers was funny: Care for Our Wounded Soldiers or COWS!

Luisa's apartment is just like a community house, where local and foreign visitors come and go. Rita and I have our own room, but the dining room, kitchen, shower and toilet are shared. We take a bath at least once a day. At night you sweat much due to the heat, and after a few jeepney rides, it seems as if you had just crawled through a sewer. You have to remember not to take a bath at a time when half of Manila is under the shower because you will enjoy only a few drops of water. And a typhoon can disrupt the water supply in some neighborhoods for hours, or even the electric supply in the whole city.

The house is located in a quiet neighborhood. But appearances can be deceiving. Around the corner is the TV station, ABS-CBN. A few months ago it was an important target of Gringo Honasan's coup attempt. Our Luisa had to leave the place, and when order was restored she could notice that a few bullets had found their way to her front door.

On the other side of the street is the building of the JUSMAG, the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group. Occupying the building are American military advisers who help the Philippine armed forces fight against the New People's Army (NPA), the armed resistance. The United States has a strong military presence in the strategically located Philippines. Subic naval base and Clark air base are its two biggest military bases outside American territory.

### Colonized

The influence of the United States in the Philippines goes much deeper than just military affairs. As Rita and I stroll through the streets, we are followed and addressed by the children: "What's your name?" "Hey Joe!" "Kano!" (for Amerikano). Every white person is for them an American. We notice that we, being foreigners, are accorded friendlier treatment and more respect than Filipinos would treat their countrymen.

It is strange that many Filipinos reproach themselves for their subservience to foreign countries. Apologetically, they would say that they have a colonial mentality. But is it not rather the opposite? Is it not the foreigners who have a



colonial mentality? And is the mentality of the Filipinos not colonized, first by the Spaniards and then by the Americans?

The Spanish colonizers did their job well. Eighty-five percent of Filipinos are Catholic. When a jeepney passes by a church, the passengers make the sign of the cross. Every Congress session begins with a prayer. During Lent the price of fish soars and McDonald's sell fishburger.

The Philippines has been the only real colony of Spain. In 1898, after the Spanish-American war, the United States bought the country from Spain for twenty million dollars. The American colonizers set up an education infrastructure in the country and fed the population from childhood with American values. In 1946 Washington granted Manila the long-promised formal independence. But the medium of instruction has remained English. The pupils know more about American history than Philippine history and the alphabet is taught with "A is for apple" and "S is for snow" to children who know only of mangoes and rain.

In sport Filipinos, who are of short height, could become very good football players and cyclists. But the national sport is basketball, learned from the Americans. On every street corner in Manila you can find a hotdog, pizza, or hamburger joint. Politicians and businessmen fly to San Francisco or Los Angeles for a simple medical examination. They also send their children there for university studies. And on the new 100-peso bill, the Stars and Stripes, the flag of the USA, waves proudly.

### **The Leyte Refugees**

November 1987. The first thing we set to do in the Philippines is to study the language. To be able to converse with the ordinary people, you have to know the local language. The problem is that the Philippines, with its many islands, has 87 different languages, of which eight are the most widely spoken. The language of Manila and nearby provinces, Tagalog, has been proclaimed the official national language. Although not all Filipinos master Tagalog, you can get along with it quite well in most parts of the country.

The first Tagalog course will start only after the New Year. We have no regrets, for that gives us two months to get to know the country and the people somewhat better. The CPHC suggests that we follow a substantive 'exposure program'. Contacts with non-government and people's organizations are to be complemented with visits to projects in slum areas and in the countryside. The purpose is to get an insight into the broad social context within which the health projects of the CPHC are taking shape. We are very eager to do this, certainly after being told that the sugar-island Negros is on the agenda.



## 6 KASAMA

One of the big issues that we are directly confronted with, is that of human rights. Every day the newspapers report of human rights violations. Daily, Roger and Luisa come home with stories about repression against workers and trade unionists or about military violence against women and children in the countryside.

Upon assuming power in 1986, President Corazon Aquino--her husband Ninoy was shot dead in 1983 by the Marcos military--promised to make human rights a top priority. She released most of the political prisoners and repealed some of Marcos' repressive decrees. But after the failure of peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front (NDF), the umbrella organization of the underground revolutionary movement, Aquino declared total war against the "insurgency". Armed civilian guard or vigilantes were formed to prevent the population, through terror, from supporting the people's movement. Many peasant families fled to the provincial cities or to Manila.

That's what the refugees from Leyte did. Several tens of families on the island became fed up with being hunted by the military and decided to go to Manila, where they found refuge on a university campus. On November 1, a few days after their arrival, the police conducted a raid. Thirty-eight refugees were arrested on trumped-up charges of being members of the New People's Army (NPA)..

A few days later their case was heard in court. On the steps of the Supreme Court building, two of the accused were kidnapped by agents in civilian clothes. This happened right before the eyes of the media and the police. The two were added to the list of the "disappeared", people who have been arrested by security agents and of whom nothing more is heard.

### **The Alex Boncayao Brigade**

The same week, the police launched early morning raids in some slum districts. In these raids, all boys and men were taken out of their homes. Scores were arrested after being identified by a masked informer. The accusation against them is membership in the Alex Boncayao Brigade (ABB), the urban guerrilla unit of the NPA.

The military and police are obsessed with the ABB. In four days the ABB eliminated ten policemen. The urban guerrilla squads that carry out such operations are called Sparrow Units because just like sparrows, they come and disappear quickly and unnoticed.

The Americans are also after the sparrows. Shortly before our arrival, the ABB killed a U.S. marine and two servicemen near Clark Air Base. The ABB



had earlier declared that for every ten of the 150 tanks that the U.S. delivers to the Philippine army, an American soldier would be killed.

We discuss these events with Roger. I cannot suppress a spontaneous sympathy for the ABB: sparrows against the eagle, the dwarf against the giant. It also seems to me that the ABB's presence is testament to the strength of the Philippine guerrilla movement, which is no longer limited to the countryside but is able to operate in the capital and strike at the very heart of the regime. As far as the targets of the ABB are concerned: the police are notoriously infamous for their harassment and extortion practices against ordinary people, and the Americans are after all a foreign occupation force.

Nevertheless, all that violence stirs in me a feeling of uneasiness. Is every sparrow operation carefully thought out? Did every victim deserve the death penalty? Is there a broader mass base in the communities supporting these operations?

Violence is a daily fare in the Philippines. The newspapers and tabloids are littered with news about murders and killings, accompanied by gruesome pictures. The titles of the most popular films also reflect that: *Fistfight*, *Fight to Win*, *Win to Fight*, *Fight or Die*, *Bloodfist*. Possession of firearms is an important symbol of machismo. At the entrance of discos, bars, restaurants and banks is a notice: "Please deposit your firearms with the guard."

### **The Kilusang Mayo Uno**

The workers are also experiencing a tough time. At the end of October, the militant trade union KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno or May First Movement) called for a general strike for a 10-peso wage increase. One enterprise after another went on strike. The capitalists and the authorities reacted sharply. The Rotary Club clamored for the dissolution of the KMU. At a speech before the business community in Makati, President Aquino promised to dismantle all picket lines: "We will not allow a noisy minority to use strikes to create the conditions for a communist take-over."

the police and the military interpreted the words of the president as a license for repression against the KMU. Within a few days, 28 picket lines were broken up by force. At the Swiss multinational Nestlé, a worker was killed as a company truck brutally drove into the picket line. Trade union leaders were also targeted. On November 5, a death squad shot Mario Villar, the brother of KMU vice-chairperson Leto Villar, in a clear case of mistaken identity. At the funeral of a policeman gunned down by the ABB, a streamer is unabashedly unfurled: "Kill Beltran". Crispin Beltran is the popular KMU chairperson.



November 18. Roger has arranged a meeting for me with the secretary general of the KMU, Bob Ortaliz. The labor center holds office in Sampaloc, an old district in Manila. The hall is full of posters, streamers and socially realistic paintings depicting the workers' struggle.

Bob Ortaliz is a friendly forty-something. From behind his big eyeglasses, he gives me a questioning look. When I tell him that we will be going for an exposure program in Negros in a few weeks' time, he becomes visibly enthusiastic. He hails from Negros, where he co-founded the trade union of sugar workers, the National Federation of Sugar Workers.

I try to measure his reaction to the recent anti-KMU witch-hunt. "Aquino's red-baiting is clearly a declaration of war on the workers' movement. The manner by which the picket lines are attacked is far more brutal than what we experienced under the dictator Marcos. But the KMU will not give in. All dismantled picket lines have been restored and sectoral strikes are going to be held in solidarity."

Is it not extremely difficult to develop normal trade union activity under the present conditions? Very difficult, says Ortaliz. "But the KMU continues to grow despite the anti-worker policy of Aquino." And with a blink of an eye: "But in the regions where the guerrillas are strong, we are losing members. Many of our people are becoming frustrated by the limitations of the legal workers' struggle, which is always met with fierce repression. In the countryside there is an alternative just nearby, in the surrounding hills. People are enlisting in the New People's Army."

I am surprised by the openness with which the trade union leader speaks about the guerrillas. I wanted to ask him whether the subsequent repression following the ABB operations has not especially harmed the workers in the slum areas. But I chose to keep my question to myself.

November 19. Rita and I join some KMU militants for a visit to a picket line. In the furniture factory Rapid, the workers have been on strike for more than three years. They are demanding management compliance with the collective bargaining agreement, recognition of trade union rights, a 13th-month pay, and the re-hiring of all dismissed union officers. But the factory owner responded with a lockout. Because of this, the workers decided to maintain the picket line so that the owner would not be able to take the finished furniture and machines out of the factory.

All these three years, ten strikers' families have been staying in makeshift tents and huts that block the factory entrance. A few 'picket line babies' have been born here.



Just like in Smokey Mountain, I feel incapable of posing many questions to the strikers, or even to stay longer. I feel like an intruder. It is so much safer to just write about the strike for our newsletter in Belgium, than to be here at the picket in flesh and blood. Nevertheless, I know that it is only by working among the common people and experiencing their plight that you can arrive at genuine solidarity. Solidarity by remote control is an all-too-easy illusion that I must urgently get rid of.

### **An Uneasy Proposal**

November 21. Delen dela Paz, who was one of those who welcomed us at the airport, comes to see us to discuss our work. She is a doctor and the outgoing director of the CPHC. An energetic woman who likes to talk and laugh, with cute dimples on her cheeks. She is the sister-in-law of Bobby dela Paz, a doctor who was murdered by the military in 1982 on the island of Samar because he was supposed to have given medical care to the guerrillas.

We are curious what she has to tell us. Actually, we would like to have a more concrete picture of the work that awaits us here. We have come to the Philippines to be deployed as doctors in the countryside. Logical, given the fact that 70 percent of the Filipinos live in the countryside where the state's health care system is practically non-existent. An example of the reverse care law': where the need for service is greatest, there it is the least available.

While still in Belgium, Rita and I had been informed by the CPHC that we would be working for a Community-Based Health Program in Samar. That is a local health project that is developed by the community (village, quarter, parish or people's organization). We immediately named a small group of relatives and friends who were willing to support our project, Support Group Samar. Our newsletter at the homefront was baptized Samar Newsletter. At one of our farewell parties a family friend even spoke of Rita and me as the Good Samaritans!

And now Delen is here to inform us that the project in Samar is not ready to receive us. The presence of two Caucasians would attract the attention of the military, especially now that the local health care organization is being branded as "subversive" because of its work among the basic masses. Secondly, it is deemed to be a luxury to have two doctors working in a small project, while the need elsewhere is more urgent. Lastly, the work in Samar requires a lot of walking, simply for want of roads in the interior. And a lot of walking is not possible for Rita because of her handicap. In short, the Council has a new proposal: I may go to Samar all by myself, and Rita can work in the slum districts of Cebu City, on the nearby island of Cebu. Every three months I could visit Rita for a week or so.



I have to compose myself. I am sure that a big cloud is now visible on my face. Does Delen know that we are a couple? We have been together barely a year. We are thinking of having children. Does a high level of commitment require that we must have long separations? and how do we explain this to our parents?

I consult with Rita. We hesitate to express our doubts to Delen, but nevertheless we ask her to look for another solution. In our first year here, we prefer to devote sufficient time to adjust--learning the language, getting acquainted with the health projects--and to each other. We are not yet sufficiently prepared for difficult situations, such as in Delen's proposal. But I have the feeling that we will gradually overcome all this.

Without any problem Delen accepts our refusal. She then suggests an alternative. After the language school, we can start working at the education department of the Council. To have a taste of health education work, we can begin the following day with a three-day course on rational drug use. In the meantime, the Council will look for a local project where both of us can take part. Who knows, perhaps in Negros, where we are set to go this December for an exposure visit.

### **Lessons On Culture**

November 22. Rational drug use is a good subject, because the Philippine market is flooded with useless, ineffective and even dangerous medicines. Many products can be bought over the counter, without prescription. Medicines are aggressively promoted over the radio and television. Each night a TV newscast is interrupted with an advertisement for the "Swedish quality product, Alvedon, which doctors trust". Alvedon is nothing more than the 63rd brand name of paracetamol, a simple painkiller. Expensive and superfluous vitamin preparations are also recommended: "Theragran-M: it's a must!"

Rita and I sit rather uneasy with about forty Filipino participants. The Filipinos' concept of time is different from ours. We are always the first to arrive in the conference room. Filipinos usually reserve half an hour to be late. The course is being given in 'Taglish', a mixture of Tagalog and English, of which we barely understand anything. At the same time, this is also our first introduction to Filipino cooking. Only fork and spoon are used as cutlery, or you just eat with your hands. Using your fingers you knead some rice into a little ball, and then using your thumb you push this into your mouth. Having to eat rice three times a day, also during breakfast, is the culprit for my constipation. Neither can I stomach to eating all that fish and seafood. I just resort to a white lie: that I am allergic to seafood.



These little things about the time, language and food irritate me. I am put in an even worse mood upon being told that boys and girls sleep in separate quarters. That means that Rita and I cannot sleep together. I realize that living in the Philippines will require a far bigger adjustment than I had thought.

Fortunately, there is also time for fun during the training course. Action songs are interspersed between the lessons. These are songs accompanied by gestures and dance steps. Much laughter is evoked when all these grown-ups act like children. We do not want to be upstaged by the Filipinos so we teach them, with success, the Belgian song *In a Small Railway Station*. Also nice is the short play about the proper use of medicines, wherein I play the evil multinational enterprise, wearing a tall hat made of paper on my head and painted with the American flag.

### **A Visit To The Hospital**

November 26. It is difficult to start working in a non-government project on primary health care without knowing how the official health care system looks like. Therefore, the Council has arranged for us a visit to a hospital, through the Alliance of Health Workers, a trade union of medical practitioners.

The National Orthopedic Hospital lies at a busy street full of jeepneys, auto repair shops and food joints. The building looks rotten. Clayish yellow paint is peeling off the walls. You see right away that it is an orthopedic hospital: at the entrance wooden crutches are being sold. In the reception hall we have to squeeze our way through patients and their families.

We are introduced to Mar, a young female social worker. She guides us to the charity ward, the poor people's ward. "Charity" appears to me not the most appropriate description for what we are seeing here. A foul smell hangs in the dim ward. The beds are cramped against each other, the mattresses are old and dirty, and the sheets are tattered. The few ventilators are not sufficient to give the patients any cool air. It is hard to imagine the spacious, well-lit and comfortable University Hospital in Antwerp, where I had my internship just a few months earlier. We are shocked to see two patients sharing one bed. "For the 83 beds that are available right now, there are more than 100 patients," Mar explains. "They are not able to pay for private medical care, although in the private rooms, many beds are empty."

Rita and I attract much attention in the poor people's ward. "Hey, Joe!" With Mar as interpreter, we engage in a brief chat with a few patients who are resourcefully making handicrafts from what is available. They are making Christmas decorations out of small empty medicine bottles. A boy in a



wheelchair smiles broadly at us and gives us two self-made keychains. He refuses any payment.

There are very few nurses in the ward. "For this big amount of work, there are only four of us nurses and four assistant nurses in the morning," says Mar. "In the afternoon we are only two plus two, and at night we have to do it all with only the two us. It is the family that takes care of the patients. Relatives bathe the patient, feed him and spend the whole night beside his bed."

That's where the real charity is! In the Filipino culture the extended family comprises the equivalent of a life insurance. But this natural safety net has gaps. He who is alone is left to his fate. Upon going out of the charity ward, we see in the corridor an extremely malnourished little woman quietly dying.

Together with Mar we take a jeepney to the Quezon Institute. This is a big sanatorium, with 600 beds, and home to those suffering from tuberculosis. It was named after Manuel Quezon, who in 1935 became the first president of the Philippine Commonwealth (under the American guardianship) and who later died of tuberculosis. The government pays the treatment in the institute, but not the expensive medication. Unless you are chosen by the Korean Sisters of Mercy. If you are less than fifty years old, a Manila resident, and if your illness is not yet in its advanced stage, you receive medication from the good sisters. And what about the many sick people who fall outside this category? "Oh," laughs a nurse, apparently indifferent, "there are also those who come here just to die."

## Olongapo

December 5. Without the Subic Naval Base, Olongapo would have been an inconspicuous, disconsolate provincial city. It consists of no more than a long main street. But as soon as the American soldiers--sometimes numbering from 7,000 to 10,000 per ship--are let loose, the 500 bars, restaurants and discos suddenly come to life. The soldiers are greeted by an enormous streamer: "Welcome, U.S. Marines of the USS Enterprise!" Officially, prostitution does not exist in Olongapo, but some 6,000 women are registered as either hospitality girls or escort girls. In addition, about 10,000 work illegally, without the necessary permits. That means that they do not undergo the required bi-weekly check-ups for sexually transmitted diseases.

As part of our exposure program, Rita and I are being hosted by Buklod, a meeting center for prostitutes. In a relaxed atmosphere, women can talk there about their problems: exploitation by pimps, violence inflicted by the marines, unwanted pregnancy, drugs, AIDS. Of the 51 found seropositive with the HIV-



virus detected in the Philippines by September 1987, 47 are women earning their living around the U.S. bases. AIDS is clearly imported here.

We have a talk with the clients of Buklod. The girls know all the names of the American battleships, complete with the number of marines and the dates on which they dock at Subic. Towards evening the girls begin to put on their make-up. They have to be on time for their work, otherwise they'll get penalized.

Later in the evening, we see them back in the sex bars, where we and the staff of Buklod have a guided visit. In the Pussycat, a third-rate jukebox is playing. The waitresses are dressed in sexy red dresses that leave little to the imagination. A pint of beer costs only seven pesos, but if you want female company, you have to pay 50 pesos for a so-called lady's drink.

The show begins. It is a strange feeling to be an onlooker as the women with whom we just talked start to undress on the stage and gyrate in front of us. A giant bubble bath with a couple of pseudo-mermaids appears to be a special attraction. It becomes too much for me as the girls perform all kinds of vaginal tricks. I feel like a spectator torn between sympathy for the girls and involuntary voyeurism. I am annoyed seeing how rudely the well-fed American soldiers treat and paw the girls. But our female guide companions remain stoically calm. After a while the girls, again in bikinis, come to say hello to us.

Coming out of the bar, we witness how the police roughly drive away a female street vendor from the vicinity of the bars. The petite woman reacts angrily, and this draws a comment from an American soldier who was passing by: "Just shoot her!"

The next morning we encounter the girls again in Buklod. Now there is more time and trust for a longer chat. Soon, some myths are exposed, such as "women choose to be prostitutes", "they can leave whenever they want", "they earn much". Most of the women who work here come from the poorest regions of the country, such as Samar, Leyte or Bicol. Poverty forces them to prostitute themselves. These girls are imprisoned in their jobs. They work seven days a week, often sleep in the bar and are awakened when there is a customer. Remarkably enough, they cherish the hope of getting away from all this by marrying a U.S. marine. This despite the many tragic stories of unwanted pregnancy, abortion, beating, rejection.

Rita and I listen silently. What strikes us is that these young Filipinas do not look like a bunch of miserable souls at all. On the contrary. While sharing their sad stories, they are laughing all the time. We still have to get used to this habit of laughing at moments when we would rather tend to weep.



## Negros

Because all the problems besetting the Third World are conspicuously present in the Philippines, the country could be considered a microcosm of the South. In turn, Negros is the microcosm of the Philippines. A bit of history.

In the late '60s, a Jesuit made a pioneering study of the *sacadas*, the sugarcane cutters of Negros. These seasonal workers work 10 hours a day, seven days a week for starvation wages. During the harvest time, they and their families live for three to four months in big wooden barracks. Each family is given a wooden plank, on which they have to put together all their household utensils. Water supply, toilets, facilities for children, privacy for parents, kitchen or garbage cans are totally non-existent.

In the beginning of the '70s, some members of the Church began to condemn this situation. They stood up for the *sacadas* and other rural workers, for the poor peasants and the fisherfolk. They set up basic Christian communities that came more and more into conflict with the sugar barons, the military and politicians. When dictator Marcos declared martial law, leading priests such as Louie Jalandoni, then director of the Social Action Center of the diocese, went underground and joined the armed resistance.

In 1983 the world price of sugar collapsed, because Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola began to use the artificial sweetener isoglucose instead of sugar. Thousands of sugarworkers lost their job. The big landowners left their land untilled and forbade the rural workers from tilling it to produce food. Famine ensued.

In the center of Negros glows the beautifully conical Kanlaon volcano. In the mid-'80s Bishop Fortich began to speak of the "social volcano" on the island, which could erupt at any moment. In reality this was already happening. The militant trade union of sugarworkers, the National Federation of Sugar Workers, was getting stronger every day. Hundreds of church, human rights and other non-government organizations were active in liberating education and action. Practically the whole interior of Negros came under the control of the New People's Army.

December 12. Rita and I are at the national airport of Manila, ready to fly for Bacolod, the capital of Negros. The airplane leaves 40 minutes late. Our seatmate makes the joke that PAL, Philippine Airlines, stands for "Plane Always Late."

After an hour we land at Bacolod's small airport. Otik is waiting for us, a dark pocket-sized woman, round like a ball because she is eight months pregnant. She looks 18, but it turns out that she is already 35. Otik will be our



host for ten days. She brings us to the office of an NGO where we are accorded a big room.

December 13. It is Sunday. Otik comes to fetch us...to go to Mass! That is the last thing we expected, but we keep silent. After all, we are on an integration visit and thus we should adjust. In the jeepney Otik tells us that the parish of Banago has an active basic Christian community and a progressive priest. Banago is somewhat outside the city. In accord with good Filipino custom, we arrive late. We enter the chapel of Father Gerson during the consecration. But no problem, Father Gerson stops his activity to warmly welcome us. We are considerably embarrassed and, worst of all, the priest calls Rita and me to the altar. We have to introduce ourselves to everyone in the Church. Applause.

After the mass, a well-to-do parishioner invites Father Gerson, Rita and myself to a sumptuous breakfast. The father tells about the basic Christian communities that make up the core of the Church in Negros. But Church people who are socially and politically involved are subjected to repression. Father Gerson has worked for five years in the countryside in South Negros, but has had to leave when his name appeared in the military's blacklist.

In the afternoon we take a ride back to Bacolod. It is a pleasant little city. No tall buildings or heavy traffic. In front of the cathedral is a beautiful Spanish plaza with much green and dotted with stalls, vendors and shoeshine boys. Beside the cathedral is the house of the bishop. But the old Antonio Fortich has had to find another place to stay. His residence still shows signs of a grenade attack. The bishop is unpopular among members of the military and the paramilitary death squads, who have branded him the "Red bishop" or "Kumander Tony" (meaning NPA commander).

It is almost six o'clock and getting dark when we, together with Otik, visit a slum neighborhood. In the narrow alleys we are ganged up by children who are touching us, wanting to shake our hands, asking "What is your name?" and then laughing and giggling heartily. Through tiny windows and door openings--real windows and doors are unknown here--we see here and there television sets turned on. Christmas lights flicker off and on, and give the slum district a special atmosphere.

But reality confronts us when we come to a washing area. In an open place four women are cleaning and repairing used rice sacks. For 25 washed sacks a middleman pays a mere peso. A repaired hole in the sack means 25 cents. The women still have to work for one more hour, otherwise they won't earn enough today to buy tomorrow's food for their families.



**Nanay**

December 14. Negros, sugar island. With an organizer of the National Federation of Sugar Workers we go to have a look at a sugar plantation. Hacienda de la Rama stretches to a great part of the municipality of Murcia. The owner stays almost the whole year in Manila and leaves the management of his land to an overseer.

The heaviest work on the plantation is cutting the sugarcane. The sacadas are paid per ton of cut sugarcane. They usually get no more than 40 pesos a day. Hardly enough to live on, much less to support a family. Beyond the harvest season the sacadas have nothing more to do in the hacienda. They have to go elsewhere to look for work. The planting of the sugarcane stumps is a job for the women and children. For this work, payment is also per piece: 61.65 pesos per 1,000 planted stumps. Finally there are the weeders, again a women's job, which brings in 32 pesos per day. That hardly buys you three kilos of rice.

We stay overnight with an elderly woman, a trade unionist. Everyone calls her Nanay. Nanay has nine children, five of which are still living at home. She is terribly busy: housekeeping and working in a trade union and in the fields is difficult to combine. One of Nanay's children works as a maid for a rich family in Manila. No husband around. Has he left? Does he work as a migrant worker in "Saudi", the collective name Filipinos give to the whole of the Arabic world? We deem it inappropriate to ask.

Nanay's house is built of bamboo. It has no electricity, no flowing water nor toilet. I wonder where I can go for a pee and, eventually, where and how I can answer the bigger call of nature. There is practically nothing in the little house. The bamboo floor serves as the chair, table and bed, all in one. We find it difficult to eat with our hands. At night I can hardly sleep on the uneven bamboo floor. And starting from 3 a.m. we are treated to a concert of cocks' crows. The whole situation again puts me in a bad mood. At the same time I can blame myself for feeling annoyed with one day and one night in these conditions, while for Nanay this is for life.

December 15. Rita finds Nanay's hospitality somewhat artificial, her enthusiasm not genuine. We've heard that she always likes to receive visitors and have them spend the night. Is she just fulfilling a job that has been given to her by the trade union? Then at breakfast we find out that Nanay's brother was shot dead the week before by members of a civilian death squad, because he participated in the election campaign of a progressive candidate. This explains Nanay's aloofness. She suggests that we go with her to the wake of her brother. It is an hour's walk through the sugarcane fields.



It is the first time that we get acquainted with the Filipino way of dealing with death. A wake usually lasts nine days and takes place at home. The coffin is at the center of the little house. Half of the cover is open from the chest level of the dead person to the top, so that everyone can pay his respects to the embalmed corpse. It is an odd mixture of neighbors and relatives who come to eat, drink, play Chinese mahjong--all around the coffin-- and above all, talk a lot about the beloved dead one.

In the few weeks since our arrival, Rita and I have been confronted with much violence. Real violence: the murder of Nanay's brother, the repression against the picket lines, the U.S. marine who yelled "Shoot her!" And we've seen even more structural violence: the exploitation of the *sacadas*, the little woman who quietly lay dying in the hospital, the sex industry in Olongapo. Strange how a man's life seems to be less valuable here than in our country, but how so much more value is attached to the dead.

### **Tatay**

December 17. Next are the fisherfolk. For kilometers we drive along prawn farms, ponds for cultivating prawns. Following the decline of prices for sugar, many landowners have shifted to the relatively more profitable prawn cultivation. This non-labor intensive cultivation does not create any employment opportunity for the dismissed sugar workers. The ponds are also damaging to the environment because they erode the subsoil. Negros takes care of its prawns better than of its people: the animals get light at night, the people don't.

Sitio Laghit is a small, peaceful fisherfolk's village at the north coast of Negros. But it is almost pushed into the sea by the upcoming fishponds. A big landlord has bought up the land. Thirty-two homes are affected. Tatay Dicoy, the chair of the local fisherfolk's organization, takes us around the village.

Towards the evening the villagers come to the little terrace in front of Tatay's small house, wanting to get acquainted with the foreigners. Royal Cola and cheap brandy are served. These simple fisherfolk have not even heard of Belgium. After our explanation that Belgium is not located in America, someone asks if we then have been to university in Los Angeles. We are in a dilemma what picture we must paint of our country. On the one hand, we explain that Belgium has more welfare and better social services than the Philippines. On the other hand, we want to make it clear to them that capitalism in Belgium leads to a dual society and that the welfare in the North is built for a great part on the exploitation of the South. From the reactions of the fisherfolk we notice that we have not succeeded in putting this across. In America, and thus also in Belgium, everyone is rich, period.



As more brandy is drunk, tongues are getting looser. A guitar is brought out. There is singing and laughter. Rita and I cannot escape, we also have to sing. *You are my sunshine*, in duet. It starts raining. It is 9:00 at night, very late for a fishing village. We decide to get our straw mats. We wake up when the roof begins to leak right above our heads and we have to move our mats.

### Neneng

December 29. In the Social Action Center of the diocese of Bacolod we meet Gally, a very tall and sympathetic guy. He is a laboratory technician, and active in the trade union of health workers. We spend the rest of the day at the clinic, with Fe Mamon, nicknamed Neneng. She is a doctor who practices acupuncture and conducts consultations for the poor of the diocese.

We stay overnight with Neneng, a nice woman with a soft hissing voice. Her graying hair is pony-tailed. Through her glasses, a pair of kind eyes look with ease at you. She is the youngest of six children, Neneng tells us. She comes from a poor family. Her parents did everything so that the children could go to school and build a better future for themselves. Neneng's brothers and sisters took that rather materialistically: they went to the Promised Land, the United States. After the death of Neneng's father, her mother also emigrated there. Regularly she calls up Neneng and prods her to set up a doctor's practice in the States. But since her studies, Neneng has been , socially conscious. She has decided to work for the poor. She is now the only doctor in the Social Action Center.

Manny, Neneng's husband, is an organizer among jeepney drivers. At the same time, he regularly gives a hand to the organizational work among peasant and sugarworkers. He says that the influence of the guerrilla movement is continuously increasing. Because of their social commitment, there are times that Manny and Neneng do not see each other for weeks or months. On the other hand, they tell us, it is their common dedication that gives more depth to their relationship, despite the separations. Food for thought for Rita and me.

Our conversation comes to the subject of children. A favorite subject in the children-friendly Philippine society. Neneng tells us right away that she and Manny cannot have children. Such openness concerning private matters is normal here. When we would start a conversation with the weather, Filipinos immediately ask you, "And how many children do you have?" A little embarrassed, we say truthfully that three days after our arrival in the Philippines we have stopped using the pill and are planning to have children.

Neneng and Manny have an adopted daughter of four, Aleng. She looks somewhat withdrawn and thin. The first half hour no word comes out of her



mouth; she only nods and uses her hands to point out something. I try hard to amuse her and she finally begins to laugh and play with us.

Then Neneng tells her story. Aleng is the child of a couple, friends of hers, who joined the guerrilla years ago. As is the practice of guerrilla couples, after the birth of little Aleng, the baby was given to peasant sympathizers in a nearby village. Thus the child is spared the danger and deprivations of guerrilla life, and yet remains accessible to the parents who, once in a while, can visit the child.

But the poor peasant family with whom Aleng stayed had too little money to buy milk for the baby. The child got weak and became sick. (Neneng has also this strange habit of laughing while telling something sad!) When Aleng's parents found out, they decided to ask help from friends in the city. And so it happened that Neneng and Manny took the responsibility of caring for the little Aleng.

In the evening, in bed, Rita and I talk further. We are struck by the quiet self-confidence with which Neneng and Manny handle situations that, for us, are almost unthinkable. And, of course, by their spirit of sacrifice and perhaps even more by that of their friends in the mountains. I don't think I would be able to give up my own child for my commitment. Nevertheless, many poor people in the Third World are compelled to abandon their children or even sell them out of mere economic necessity. They simply do not have the luxury of choice. In the case of Aleng's parents, their decision was a conscious, well thought-out choice: to fight for a new society, where no one will be forced any longer to leave behind or sell his children.

December 21. On our way back to the airport we see the military at work. They stand next to their jeep, roughly whisking away some suspects. Some of the soldiers are masked. Worried, I think of Neneng and Manny, of Gally and Nanay.

## Tagalog

January 4, 1988, 7:10 in the morning. Ring! The school bell. The pupils head for their classes. Rita and I have decided to spend four hours a day learning Tagalog. Not an easy task. This originally Malayan language is completely different from European languages. It all begins with a root word or stem (for example, *taba*: fat, pork), to which a prefix or suffix is added to come to an independent noun (*katabaan*: fatness), an adjective (*mataba*: fat) or a verb (*magpataba*: to fatten). Fortunately, some root words come from Spanish, and you may also integrate English words into Tagalog. Verb forms often get *mag-* as prefix. For example, an English root word would be prefixed with *mag-* and thus become *mag-enjoy*. But Taglish is often written in a Filipino way: jeep



becomes *dyip*. The same with the French word coup d'etat (*kudeta*) and champagne (*tsampan*). It is funny and also easy that armpit is called here *kilikili*! But these are rare exceptions in a sea of A's and repeated syllables: *magkababayan* (countrymen), *magpapakumbaba* (humble), or *bababa ka na ba* (are you going down already). Hilarity in the class when I make the mistake of saying "I am rather dead" (dead is *patay* in Tagalog), while I really mean thin (*payat*).

## The Movement

February 5. We read in the newspapers a declaration of General De Villa, the new army chief of staff: "We have broken the nerve center of the communists in Manila." The army has just arrested 31 alleged top cadres of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF). Two small clinics of the Alex Boncayao Brigade, the urban guerrillas in Manila, have been dismantled. A computerized communications center and a Russian manual have been seized. "A big victory," boasts De Villa.

But in the next few days, the press paints a different picture. Twenty-six of the 31 arrested are released due to lack of evidence. Among those nabbed are even children. Three of those arrested file a complaint that they have been tortured. The sophisticated communications equipment turns out to be a simple short-wave radio and the Russian manual is the Japanese manual for the radio set.

March 29. Just on the anniversary of the New People's Army (NPA), the military makes a big catch. In Manila, five top cadres of the CPP are arrested. President Aquino rejoices, claiming this is the beginning of the end for the armed opposition.

The media pays much attention to the clandestine documents found in the possession of the five CPP cadres. According to the documents, the guerrilla war of the NPA is scoring advances. The communists are supposed to be implementing a six-year plan to launch a general uprising towards the year 1990. As preparation, new tactics and techniques of warfare are being applied, such as urban guerrilla warfare, economic sabotage using explosives and the setting up of battalions (300-500 men). The CPP aims to transform the guerrilla army into a regular people's army. Defense Minister Ramos proposes the creation of the Citizens' Armed Forces Geographical Units or CAFGUs to intensify the counter-insurgency campaign.

But the CPP documents also state that the ABB must lessen its operations and be more selective with its targets. After all, a big number of the movement's allies from the middle class have been frightened off by the ABB's trigger-happy



heroes. The discussion that we held with Roger is thus also being undertaken within the CPP!

The media make more announcements on discussion points within the movement. "The movement" stands for the national-democratic movement, or in short, natdem or ND. "National" means the struggle for genuine independence of the Philippines against foreign domination in the economic, political, military and cultural fields. Hence, against the U.S. military bases, the vicious role of transnational corporations, for example in the pharmaceutical industry, the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, the American influence in education and culture, etc. "Democratic" means, foremost, the struggle for genuine land reform in favor of the poor peasants, who comprise the majority of the Philippine population. For what can you do with political democracy if there is no economic democracy? In essence, this means land to the tiller and just wages for the workers. The movement also stands for the economic demands and the democratic rights of workers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, slum residents, women, youth and students.

The national-democratic movement carries out its struggle with different means. The people's organizations use legal means: demonstrations, strikes, petitions, occupations. This is what we saw at the KMU, the NSFW, Gabriela. These grassroots organizations can call on a broad range of non-government organizations, such as the Council for Primary Health Care, for research, education and other services. And then you have the underground components of the movement: the CPP, the NPA and the alliance organization NDF. They have the same national and democratic objectives, but want to realize them through armed revolution.

The Filipino guerrillas carry out a protracted people's war from the countryside, following what Mao did in China. "War", because the power of the ruling class can only be defeated by an armed struggle. "People", because the revolution defends the interests of the whole Filipino people: peasants, workers, petty-bourgeoisie and even a section of the national bourgeoisie that is also victim of the foreign domination of the economy. "Protracted", because it takes time to build a counter-force, to change the balance of power and to transform the people's army from weak and small to big and strong, capable of defeating the government army. "Countryside", because it is where the large majority of the Filipino people are, the peasants, because the semifeudal conditions are their biggest problem, and because it is where the terrain for armed struggle is the best.

Disagreements over this revolutionary strategy would appear to be lingering inside the movement, especially after dictator Marcos fell and was replaced by Aquino. Some advocate for the adoption of the Nicaraguan model of people's



uprisings in the cities. The emphatic role of the urban guerillas of today should be seen in this framework.

There appear to be disagreements also among the most important former political prisoners who have been released by Aquino. Jose Maria Sison has always been the most authoritative voice among the natdems and a most sought-after speaker in the country and abroad. He defends the basic principles of the national-democratic revolution, with the protracted people's war in the countryside as the center of gravity. But openly he does not speak out against people's uprisings or guerrilla actions in the cities.

In contrast, Bernabe Buscayno, the legendary former commander of the NPA, is candid about his criticism of the ABB and distances himself more and more from the movement. And then there are the popdems, the camp of the so-called popular democrats of Boy Morales and famous priest Ed de la Torre. Both were formerly high officials of the NDF. Today they no longer put the stress on armed struggle, but rather on the development of grassroots democracy through grassroots education.

In its press releases, the CPP declares that pluralism within the movement has its limits, but where the line must be drawn is not indicated.

The arrest of a number of CPP cadres could not occur at a better time for the regime. It overshadows a grave violation of human rights, which was exposed a few days ago. While busy pasting posters denouncing the presence of U.S. military bases in the Philippines, the students Hilario Bustamante (18) and Reynaldo Francisco (20) were abducted by three plainclothes men. Two days later, Bustamante was found almost dead in the slum community Dagat-Dagatan. He was blindfolded, his hands and feet bound. His whole body bore marks of cigarette burns, bruises and stab wounds. A day later the hideously disfigured body of Francisco was found. As usual, this gruesome incident appeared in the inside pages of the newspapers.

### **The Council for Primary Health Care**

April 2. After the language school, Rita and I start working at the Council for Primary Health Care. The CHPC has offices in a tourist neighborhood, Malate, in the old city center. In the green metal gate leading to the building is a small door Philippine size. Two times a day I have to be careful not to bump my head.

The office is on the second floor. Nervous, we knock on the door. Delen welcomes us warmly. Also there is Dyeri Andamo, the incoming Council director who stayed with us in Belgium last year. Dyeri is a nurse, very much



interested in public health and with talent for didactics. With his eyeglasses and measured manners, he looks like a real intellectual. He is careful with his words, but what he says is well thought-out.

Delen and Dyeri show us the office and introduce us to the Council staff. There are four interconnected rooms and two adjoining rooms. The director's office is the only one that has air-conditioning. For here is the only computer the Council possesses. In this window-less room the computer can be kept free from dust. In the other room lives Efren, the housekeeper. Half of the time Dyeri also lives there. The interconnected rooms serve as reception area, dining room, workroom and library. In addition, there is a small kitchen, a shower and a toilet. Aside from the dining room, each room is equipped with many small wooden desks. Some 20 people work in this office, and the limited budget prevents them from renting a bigger office space.

We get to know the staff, but we fail to remember a single name or face. They don't make it easy for us, either. There is a Bel, a Mel and a Del, nicknames for persons who are in fact named Isabelle, Imelda and Edelina. At the language school names are still cuter: Bing, Ping, Bong, and Kreng-Kreng.

Time for lunch. A petite woman arrives to sell various foods packed in small plastic bags! Each one gets a small plastic bag of rice and is asked to choose what to take with it: vegetables, a chicken leg or a piece of fish that you see swimming in a bouillon in that plastic bag. Delicious! From the animated conversations of Bel, Mel & Co. we understand absolutely nothing. Two months of intensive language classes have clearly not transformed us into Filipinos. We begin to fear that Tagalog will remain an insurmountable obstacle. Nevertheless, I decide to go on. With a thick dictionary within my reach I wrestle page by page with Tagalog articles, zealously looking for the root words that seem to be incomprehensibly hiding between the craziest prefixes and suffixes.

## **We Transfer**

April 1988. Sister Luisa is expecting visitors from the Netherlands. Rita and I must look for another place to stay. We can share a small apartment with Lando, who also works for a health care organization, and his soon-to-give-birth wife Evelyn. We rent a room and share kitchen and bathroom with them.

Our room is spacious and bright. Finally we now have a double mattress and a small desk. And luckily, an electric fan; the warm season has started. We are puffing and sweating all the time. In the absence of an ordinary thermometer, we take the clinical thermometer. Indeed, the temperature rises up to 38.4 degrees Centigrade! Evelyn and Lando have no refrigerator. With this heat, bread becomes moldy and fruits and vegetables rot very fast. We are



forced to use the Filipino method: go to the market regularly and buy things in smaller quantities.

To prepare for parenthood, Lando and Evelyn have brought home a young little dog. This ugly mongrel, baptized Rambo, bites my toes and turns away from every attempt at toilet training. One day, Lando comes home with a big chick. It gets a place at the corner of the kitchen table. As soon as it becomes a hen, Lando adds a rooster. But the hen and the rooster fight, their feathers flying all over the table. In order to allay their moods, Lando sometimes lets the rooster walk around freely in the kitchen. Not amusing, especially not when the little animal cackles on top of pots and pans. Now that Rita and I cannot go to work for a project in the countryside, it is the countryside that has come to us!

### **Touch-and-Go**

Our work in the education section of the Council consists primarily of writing new manuals. Rita is working hard on the medical aspects of combating and preventing disasters, while I am writing a manual on rational drug use.

Once in a while, during lunch break, Rita and I take a walk through the streets of Malate. At times we don't feel at ease in this neighborhood, where every white person is seen as a tourist or even a sex tourist. The little commercial clinics in these streets advertise their services on big boards: pregnancy test, AIDs test, sperm count and post-coital contraception. The job vacancies at many bars ask for sexy receptionists.

This is the tidy front side of the sex industry. In the neighborhood surrounding the church of Malate we see the back side. Here Manila's child prostitutes hang around. In the early morning we see them sleeping on the sidewalks, using cartons as mats. They are only able to stand their work by using shabu, a strong amphetamine. Or they sniff glue, or Touch-and-Go, which affect the brains. Touch and go, this is how these children live: their young lives slip away as soon as they get in touch with the milieu of the sex industry, white slavery and drugs.



## Chapter Two

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### Three Times to the Countryside 1988

#### Polillo

April 27, 1988. We are now exactly six months in the Philippines, and for the first time Rita and I are going to the countryside with the Council for Primary Health Care (CPHC). A one-week primary health course will be given on the remote island Polillo.

Father Tony, the parish priest of Polillo, wants to start a Community-Based Health Program. In preparation he has started, with the help of his staff, an intensive social investigation in his parish. This is called "community diagnosis". On the basis of the results, an integrated health project can then be started. One of its components is the training of health workers from among the villagers selected by the community. It is for these people that this training is now being organized.

The training staff of the CPHC consists of Myrna and Gemma, nurses; Rhodora, a dentist; and Cynthia, a doctor. Rita and I are mere observers. We can not yet teach in Tagalog. And we would like first to observe how such a course is conducted before we try it ourselves.

Polillo is 300 km east of Manila, in the province of Quezon. Because we have to cross the Sierra Madre mountain range, this means a whole day travelling: by bus, jeepney, ferryboat and tricycle, a motorbike with a sidecar.

April 29. The course is held in the parish building. There are 30 participants, almost all of them women coming from the peasantry. Their average educational level is not higher than the fourth grade. A few even have difficulty in counting the pulse for one minute. And calculating the dosage of medicine, which requires division and multiplication, is real torment to them.

Rhodora and Cynthia, who both have enjoyed university education, give lessons that are too academic, peppered with difficult and superfluous medical terms. Myrna and Gemma, who have more experience with basic education, use more appropriate teaching methods. It is a golden rule of pedagogy that students remember only 20 percent of what they hear, 40 percent of what they also see, but up to 80 percent of what they can test or discover themselves. Therefore, Gemma and Myrna try to include as much practice as possible in the course.



During one workshop a collage is made about the causes of health problems. There is a demonstration on making herbal ointment against eczema, using tree barks, oil and paraffin wax. The participants demonstrate the health situation in their village through a drama. There is a practicum on how to take the pulse and the blood pressure, and on how to stitch a wound, using a tough piece of pigskin.

To give people an insight into the deeper causes of sickness and ill health, techniques developed by Paolo Freire known from the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are used. Gemma tells the story of Remedios, the four-year-old daughter of Monching and Thea, poor peasants in a remote village. The child had a cold, her coughing becoming worse. She got high fever and could hardly breathe. In the dead of night Monching and Thea decided to bring their child to the hospital. With Remedios in their arms they had to traverse the hills for two hours before they could reach the road. But at night no single jeepney passed by that could bring them to the city and little Remedios did not survive the morning.

"Why did Remedios die?" asks Gemma. A diligent student exclaims: "Because he had pneumonia." "Right, but why did she die of that?" Somebody else says: "There were no medicines." And a third one: "There was no doctor or clinic in the village." Gemma keeps asking: "But why did they have no medicines? And why are there no medical services and facilities?"

With every *why* question, their analysis reaches a deeper level. Through this process, the teacher and the students arrive at the conclusion that Remedios died not only because of a germ, but also because of the lack of medical care. She died because the government attaches a higher priority to servicing the foreign debt and to the military apparatus than to health care. Another cause of Remedios' death was that her parents had no money to buy medicines. For Monching and Thea are poor peasants who do not have their own land to till. Probably they have to hand two-thirds of their harvest to the landlord. Probably Remedios was also malnourished.

It is through this method that the group discovers the biological, cultural, social, political and economic factors that affect health and disease. All are links in the chain that led Remedios to her grave.

May 3. After the course we go and take a look at Polillo's health center. The small clinic, with 15 beds, accepts only Medicare patients. Medicare is a system of social security for those who have a permanent, full-time paying job. For hospitalization, Medicare reimburses a part of the incurred expense, on the average not more than 30 percent.



Those confined here must pay 18 pesos per day, 15 pesos for a doctor's consultation and the full amount for medicines. Even for the small minority that have a permanent job and are lucky enough to earn 50 pesos a day, getting sick is a very expensive affair. Is that the reason why only two of the available 15 beds are occupied? While leaving the clinic, I see from afar an obviously underfed child, naked, coming out of a dilapidated house. He squats as his loose bowel movement gushes profusely. The story of Remedios is also taking place in Polillo.

### **Mulanay**

May 13. Once again I join another training with a team from the Council. We head for the long Bondoc peninsula that, like Polillo, forms part of Quezon province. This time the three of us are doctors: the small but resolute Emily, the new graduate Nelson, and myself.

In a preparatory meeting, Emily has explained that the course would be given in a small village of the rural municipality Mulanay. We will have a simple neighborhood center at our disposal and be able to sleep among the villagers. This way we will get to know the living conditions of the peasant families.

Rita cannot come along because we have to walk a lot. Even if it is only for about five days, I find the separation hard to bear. Up to now, Rita and I have experienced and discussed together all the changes which the Philippines has brought on our lives. And how shall I be able to get along with my faulty Tagalog, with the Philippine dishes, with my companions?

After a four hours' drive from Manila, Emily, Nelson and I transfer to a local bus that will travel into the peninsula. A man in jeans sits beside me, with a big cassette player on his lap. In an unfriendly tone he asks me who I am, where I am going, which nationality I have. He wants to see my passport. Surprised, I ask who he is. "I am a military man," he says. "This district is under military control. It is off limits for foreigners."

I know for sure that no part of the Philippines has been proclaimed a military zone or is forbidden to foreigners. But the man is insisting to see my passport. I see Nelson signaling that I better give in. I ask the military man to identify himself. "This is my identification," he says, as he taps his waist. From the contours of his jeans I can see a revolver. I show the man my passport. Belgium appears to reassure him.

Only now I recall that in this same place, a few weeks ago, a Swede and a German were arrested upon leaving a guerrilla zone. They had pictures with them where they posed with M-16s for which they spent some time in a Philippine jail.



Not a cheerful thought at all. My heart is beating fast, half from fear, half from indignation. Fortunately the soldier gets off in the next village.

After the bus ride follows a very uncomfortable motorcycle ride, with seven people half-sitting and half-standing on the tricycle, and a one and a half hours' travel by foot until barrio Luna, a small hamlet of Mulanay. For an educational course this place certainly cannot be described as luxurious. No electricity, only petroleum lamps as lighting. No running water, only the brook as washing place and a spring as source of drinking water. A straw mat, or *banig*, to sleep on. No toilets, only the wide nature beyond. Through the splits in the floor I can see a pair of black pigs, and on the straw roof lands now and then a fluttering and cackling chicken. From afar and near, from every direction we hear cocks crowing the whole night through.

May 14. During breakfast we talk with Elena, our lady host. Of the Tagalog I still don't understand more than half of what is said, and Nelson translates for me. In this hilly district the farmers possess a small piece of land where they grow corn, root crops and vegetables. With rice, these form the everyday menu. Now and then there is some fish, and on special occasions such as this a thin chicken is slaughtered. The people here have seen neither a doctor nor a nurse in their whole life. The closest clinic is some 15 km away. For that matter, Elena finds 20 pesos for a consultation with the midwife too much. It is thus preferred to go to the *albularyo* or herbal doctor, or to the sari-sari store for instant medication. No one among the numerous children in the village has been vaccinated. "But every year a government veterinarian comes to vaccinate the carabaos."

### The Enigma Of The Three Isms

On that morning ten trainees arrive. Laura brings along her three-month old baby. In between the feeding times, ten-year-old *kuya* (elder brother) Nolan takes care of the baby. Elena's baby also causes some distraction. The baby boy can be kept calm only if one hand is in mama's blouse holding one of her breasts.

Emily begins to tell the story of Remedios. But after posing the very first question, "Why did Remedios pass away?", we get a totally unexpected answer. Manang Remy, an elderly peasant woman, says with a strong voice and a casual tone: "Because of the three isms". "The three what?" The small woman repeats with consenting giggling from the bystanders, "the three isms". And upon seeing our surprised faces, Remy clarifies: "Imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism, the three evils of Philippine society."

But where do the simple peasants of barrio Luna get this political wisdom and vocabulary from? "From the radio," is the laconic reply. It is difficult for us to



accept that the radical analysis of the national democratic movement can be heard on the radio. For that matter, almost no one in the village possesses a radio. It is more probable that NPA activists passed by and held a teach-in with the people. But on Nelson's question whether NPA guerrillas have been spotted here, our students answer with a smile.

I am curious to know how terms as imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism are understood by these simple people. "Imperialism, that is the American military bases," says someone. Laura adds, "Feudalism, that is the big landlord Yulo here. He possesses 7,100 hectares of land, while we must make do with only one hectare, and infertile at that."

And bureaucrat capitalism, a concept which I myself have not clearly understood? Manang Remy knows more about it: "Did you come here by bus or with the jeepney? No, you had to walk because there is no road to barrio Luna. Yet our mayor, the governor and our congressman have all promised a road a hundred times. But the money for that project went to their own pockets. Well, that is bureaucrat capitalism!"

May 17. After the theoretical part we hold consultations for the people of barrio Luna and the outlying villages. We are quite busy, for the news about the presence of real doctors has spread quickly. The interview of the patients and the measuring of the pulse and blood pressure are done by the newly trained village health workers. The villagers are surprised to see this. We doctors take care only of the physical examination and the treatment. We use each case as a learning opportunity for the new health workers.

In the biggest house of the village, a room has been converted into an improvised operating room. Emily, Nelson and I perform minor surgery. An old farmer is so happy that a big cyst in his forehead is removed, that he shakes everybody's hands, including the many spectators'. As a result of our surgical work, a number of young boys walk around the village in skirts. They have just undergone circumcision and their penises can not bear pants for a couple of days.

May 18. On the way back we see two armed men coming down a hill in our direction. Emily gets nervous. "Those are perhaps the NPA. Bert, are you not afraid?" Afraid? On the contrary, I'd rather rejoice. Would this be my first encounter with the guerrillas? The men are now approaching fast. Apparently an elderly father with his son. Each has an antique-looking carbine. Without saying a word they give us a hand and squat beside us. The older one laughs, exposing his bad teeth, and takes a handful of peanuts out of his pocket. Embarrassed, we take the peanuts. "*Salamat*". Thank you. After a couple of minutes of uneasy silence, the men stand up, bid farewell and continue their journey.



As they go beyond the hilltop, we--Emily, Nelson, our young guide Beg-beg and I--begin to talk excitedly. Were those perhaps the NPA? The two of them? And with such old firearms? Perhaps members of the people's militia of the guerrillas? In any case, they looked sympathetic. A stark contrast with the military that we had encountered along the way.

### Health Workers Under Fire

Manila, May 24. Rita and I have been counting and hoping. Rita's menstruation is already 14 days delayed. We decide to have a pregnancy test. Rita stays home, tensely waiting, while I hurry with the urine sample to the laboratory. The test costs 90 pesos and I have only 85 pesos in my pocket. No need, the lab technician understands my impatience, I may bring the five pesos later. The test is positive. From pure joy I walk into a bakeshop and order two cakes... till I realize I don't have a single peso in my pocket. I mumble an excuse and walk out without cake. I arrive home, waving the positive test result from afar.

May 25. Our joy does not last long. Rita's monthly period comes through, and because of the positive pregnancy test we know that this was actually an early abortion. A lousy day. And we just told the "good news" to our parents. In an attempt to cheer ourselves up, we go to see *"The Last Emperor"* and take an extra big ice cream for dessert.

In the evening we hear on the BBC World Service that the Belgian doctor Jan Cools is missing in Lebanon. He was probably kidnapped near the Palestine refugee camp Rashidiyeh, the same camp where I worked seven years ago. The news gives me the shivers. I recall that several Belgians have already experienced problems because of their radical involvement in serving the people and the revolution: in Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, South Africa, Lebanon. Jan's disappearance makes us keenly aware of the risks we could be facing in the Philippines.

The next day I go through the news clippings that the Council had compiled over the last few months about military repression against health workers. Soldiers who walk into health NGOs "just to check if everything is okay". Village health workers who are threatened by paramilitary men or forbidden by military authorities from visiting certain villages. On February 2 two nurses were arrested in a Manila hospital while taking care of a patient. They were accused of being members of the medical staff of the Alex Boncayao Brigade. And on April 21, the Community-Based Health Program on the island of Samar, where Rita and I were supposed to be deployed, was a victim of a military raid.

Every such case is about preventing health workers from carrying out their duty, and is a serious assault on the protection of health workers as guaranteed by



international conventions. Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions on international law concerning internal conflicts after all says: "Under no preconditions shall anyone be punished for the performance of medical activities in accordance with medical ethics, regardless of who benefits from them." And the World Medical Association stipulates that "under no conditions shall the fulfillment of the medical duty be considered an offence". Thus, even giving medical assistance to guerrillas can never be punishable--much less health work within the framework of an NGO project.

Among the newspaper clippings I come across a small item. In early March, a local leader of the people's organization BAYAN is shot dead in Bacolod by unknown assailants. It is Gally, the man of the health workers' association Rita and I met in Negros. The first victim of the ongoing repression whom we knew personally. My heart chills.

In the beginning of June 1988, Amnesty International brings out a devastating report about violations of human rights by the government soldiers and the paramilitary Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAGFUs) entitled, "Unlawful murders by military and paramilitary forces." Defense Secretary Ramos reacts angrily: "It is not easy to point your weapon at an armed enemy while Amnesty International stands there watching over your shoulder." Amnesty also reports systematic torture by soldiers. The chairwoman of the government's Human Rights Commission, however, dismisses all the accusations. "This is an orchestrated campaign against the government, possibly initiated by the rebels themselves. Of course, it is not true."

## **Ella**

June 10. Before the door stands an unknown Filipina. She looks dignified, with dark straight hair and a fine set of eyeglasses. "Rita and Bert?" she asks. She introduces herself as Ella and asks if she can come inside.

"You might find this visit from a total stranger peculiar. You don't know me, but I have heard from Filipino friends in the Netherlands what you, Rita, did in El Salvador. I also have some idea of the organizations you were working with in Belgium.

She need not say more. Filipino friends in the Netherlands, those must be representatives of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, the alliance of revolutionary organizations, which has an international office in Utrecht. The reference to Rita's work with the Salvadoran guerrillas and to our Belgian connections was also clear. I bet that Ella has something to do with the underground movement!



"I also work in the health sector," she continues, "but only UG, underground." Rita and I are too stunned to react. Ella continues: "We have a proposal. What do you think if, besides your job as development workers, you work now and then for the UG?"

Wait a minute, in the underground? What can they expect from us, foreigners? How could we possibly contribute anything? Ella suggests that I make use of my vacation several times a year to go to the guerrilla zone. The Medical Section of the NPA gives medical training to health workers of the people's army, called medics. I could help teach and supervise the medics. Sporadically there could be wounded guerrillas to take care of. In Manila we could also help in drafting manuals and sorting out medicines. Ella says she can provide us with reading materials, publications and documents of the CPP and the NDF, and that we can get political education if we want to.

Although Rita and I had hoped to have contact with the guerrillas, this meeting comes as a surprise to us. We ask for time to think things over, to let things sink in. Ella will be back in a week.

Rita encourages me to jump at the proposal. "This is your chance to do what I have done in El Salvador. I am sure you can do it. And you have always wanted to do this anyway. Don't hesitate." But I am rather afraid what awaits me with the NPA. The risks that seemed to be far away are now coming closer. Besides, I am not looking forward to being alone for a long time, without Rita. But in fact my decision is already firm. I'll do it.

June 16. Ella is there again. She has expected our decision, and goes over to business straight away. Within three days I can already have an "exposure trip" to the NPA. I am more than welcome to spend a week with them to have a feel of the work.

Sunday morning, exactly at 8 o'clock, I have to be at the BLTB bus station in Pasay City, says Ella in a conspiratorial way. There I will be met by a certain Alvin, my guide to the guerrilla camp. He will have been briefed about it, and I can fully trust him. I have to think of an alias, for in the underground you can of course not use your real name. I cannot think of one immediately. But it seems that Ella has taken care of everything. "Your UG name is Peter, and Rita becomes Gloria," she decides firmly.

## Quezon

June 19. As Alvin and I pass the last NPA control post, after an arduous climb over fantastic rock formations, a guerrilla camp unravels before my eyes, bathing in the solid shine of electric light and in the soft droning of a generator. Wow! A



feeling of satisfaction wells up in me. I have succeeded, I am with the New People's Army!

With a broad smile and extended arms, a short, well-built man welcomes us. It is Ka Roces, the camp commander. "Ka" stands for kasama, comrade, as everyone in the underground movement is called. Ka Roces leads me to the kitchen. There are still leftovers of merienda and the dinner: manioc roots in sauce and rice with lentils. Dozens of young NPA guerrillas drop by to take a look at the white visitor. One by one they introduce themselves and shake my hand amiably.

I kind of expect military ceremonies in the presence of Ka Roces, but no, the atmosphere here is relaxed, also in the presence of the commander. Besides, military terms to address someone are never used in the NPA. Everyone here is kasama, regardless of rank and status. I introduce myself as Ka Peter, but a young NPA reacts quick-wittedly: "Peter, an American name. Why don't you change it to Pedro?" The Spanish colonizers are apparently less feared than the American imperialists, and so I become known in this guerrilla camp as Ka Pedro.

After a half-hour rest, Ka Roces leads me to the operating room, a space of 7 by 6 meters, two-meter deep excavated in the hill and covered with strong plastic sailcloth. Two-meter high scaffoldings are lashed down, from which a number of surgery trainees are observing an operation. M-16 automatic rifles stand and hang around casually. The operating room itself is an excavation of one meter deeper and fully surrounded with mosquito net. Through the net I can see five figures in green aprons and caps. They are standing under a TL-lamp and bending over the operating table. The surgeon is preoccupied with various instruments. The anesthetist measures pulse, blood pressure and breathing and determines the administration of dextrose by intravenous injection.

The patient is not doing so well. The poor animal--a dog--is in the process of losing his internal organs one by one and finally undergoes a leg amputation. I am witness to the practicum on surgery.

Because I am dirty and sweating, a kasama wants to show me where I can freshen up in the river. But I am so tired from the day's march and I long for a sleeping place instead. I may sleep in a hut occupied by one of the medical teams. The place is no more than a roof made of banana leaves and a floor made of bamboo.

I find it difficult to sleep on my first night with the guerrillas. I just lie listening to the strange sounds of the forest: the quacking of the geckos, the gnashing of bamboo trees bending with the wind. Turning on this bamboo floor offers no solace to my bony shoulders and pelvis, and the mosquitoes pester me no end. If only they were no malaria-carrying mosquitoes!



June 20. When I reach the washing area the next morning, I can't believe what I see: they have built a giant water pipe system here! With an ingenious system of bamboo tubes, two showers have been constructed --one each for men and women--and even faucets.

This guerrilla camp is semi-permanent. By daylight I can better see the different structures. Beside the operating hall is a recovery room with two bamboo beds, and at the back is a small clinic with six beds. A little farther is a small school, with wooden chairs and tables and a real blackboard. Just like the operating hall these buildings have canvas as roof, camouflaged with branches to keep them inconspicuous from the enemy helicopters that may fly overhead.

### **Ka Lean**

The Medical Section is led by Ka Lean, a modest woman in her forties. She is not particularly attractive, but her little eyes exude kindness. Her rather plump built and her privileged upbringing make it rather awkward for her to move around the guerrilla surroundings. And yet, accepting the task of spending some six months a year in the guerrilla zones was no big deal to her.

Lean graduated in the mid-70s from the medical faculty of the elite University of the Philippines. Her choice becomes even more remarkable when you know that 70 percent of her classmates now have a thriving medical practice...in the United States. Her few colleagues who chose to remain in the country have made a career by working as a specialist or for the government's health ministry. I get to know and appreciate Ka Lean as an especially trustworthy comrade, dedicated and always concerned for the welfare of others.

In the Medical Section Ka Lean is assisted by Ka Apol, a thin, balding doctor who has for a couple of years specialized in surgery, and by Ka Andrea, chubby and cheery, who is a nurse. Andrea possesses the quality of tirelessly bringing to life the motto of a Filipino nurse, "TLC" or "tender, loving care", even under the difficult circumstances of guerrilla life.

The NPA medical staff in Quezon province is under the leadership of Ka Sally. She is on leave at the moment. Two days before my arrival she gave birth to a daughter. That this can occur in the guerrilla camp as the most normal thing in the world shows how well-established the NPA is here. But the delivery of milk powder is a problem. To my big surprise Ka Sally wants NAN milk powder from Nestlé for her baby "because she has no milk". It surprises me that infant food multinationals have influence even on female guerrilla fighters. The milk powder must be bought from the town center and it puts a heavy pressure on the meager budget that the NPA has at its disposal.



## Dentists And Surgeons

June 21. Last week the students took lessons on dentistry and this morning a pair of medics will be putting the theory into practice. How great is the divide separating guerrilla medicine and Western medicine! The patient, a young girl from the neighborhood, sits in an improvised dental chair. A medic provides some anesthesia by pressing his fingers on three acupuncture points on the girl's head. A second medic is supposed to pull the bad tooth, but who? "All the same," says the patient bravely, "as long as it is removed." When the tooth does not loosen immediately, a third medic comes: "Let me try it." The rest of the team stands by. With this collective approach, a self-confidence that moves mountains, the knowledge that it's this or no dental care at all, and the wholehearted cooperation of the patient--all these can only result in the tooth coming out.

June 22. There is another dog on the program. I participate with a surgical team, as the circulating nurse, the one that hands over the instruments. As a careful, scientifically trained doctor I find my fellow team members rather over enthusiastic in handling the dog's body. They are less enthusiastic when it comes to calculating the correct dosage of the medicines. 350 divided by 50 is an almost impossible assignment, and that 500 mg/500cc is the same as 1 mg/1 cc proves to be most difficult. None of the medics have been able to finish primary school. A whole day's work in arithmetic is thus included in the pharmacology course.

The training is interrupted for a while when a helicopter appears on the horizon. Everybody runs outside to collect the laundry that would attract attention from the air. Quickly some tree branches are added on the canvas and the lesson goes on as if nothing has happened. I am assured that it is practically impossible to recognize, from a helicopter, a camouflaged guerrilla camp in the forest.

June 24. My acquaintance with the guerrilla quickly reaches its end. On the eve of my departure a short despedida, a farewell party, is held. With songs, poems, a few short speeches and the inevitable cultural number of the visitor. After a long prodding I take the guitar, although I know no more than three chords. For want of something better I sing *Daar is de lente* (Spring is here), which I introduce as a revolutionary song from Europe. As closing the Internationale is sung. I sing along in Dutch, a symbol for the unity and at the same time the distance that inevitably exists between a privileged little Belgian doctor and Filipino guerrilla fighters.

June 25. We take a different route on our way out because the route that we used to go "inside" is no longer safe. Andrea, the nurse of the Medical Section, and a number of kasama accompany me. It is a toilsome journey. First along a sunken steep path downwards. It has rained and I can hardly keep my balance in the mud. I may not wear my sport shoes, because I cannot afford to reach the civilized world



with mud-stained shoes. That would mean I have been with the NPA. My slippers get stuck in the sticky mud all the time. So I decide to go barefoot.

We manage to come down. Yet, we still have to wade through a river, 34 times all in all, under the scorching sun. The river meanders through a landscape of soft rolling hills with coconut palms and sunken, bright green ricefields. To be able to step on the rocky riverbed I decide to wear my shoes, but for every crossing tiny pieces of stone manage to get inside. My feet get blisters and my backpack becomes heavier and heavier. The kasamas offer their help to carry it, but I decline. At last, we reach the ocean, where a motorized boat awaits us. It brings us to Atimonan, a town along the coast, from where Andrea and I take the bus to Manila.

The following months go smoothly. Rita and I have established ourselves in the Council, where we work hard producing new manuals. We write a couple of health project proposals that we want to be financed through Belgian NGOs. We also spend some time on the solidarity work with the Philippines in Belgium, putting out a quarterly newsletter, and we maintain an intensive correspondence with our support group that is led by Rita's sister Hilde.

### **The Belgian Connection**

October 21. A story printed in today's *Daily Globe*: "Belgian groups give 3.9 million pesos for CPP projects. The biggest Belgian organization supporting these communist projects is the "*Nationaal Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking* (NCOS, National Center for Development Cooperation)." The newspaper bases the story on a report made by the Philippine intelligence service. In that report the labor center KMU, the sugarworkers' organization NFSW and the peasant organization KMP are also branded as front organizations of the Philippine Communist Party. And since these Belgian NGOs are supporting these people's organizations, it follows that they are in fact supporting the CPP. It's as simple as that. Aside from the NCOS, also named in the list is our sending organization, *Bevrijde Wereld* (New World), and one of those named as "CPP fronts" or infiltrated organizations is the Council for Primary Health Care!

I have a meeting the whole day and have no idea yet about all that, but Rita writes in her diary:

"I am becoming restless. The slightest noise outside makes me fidgety. Instead of staying alone in the house, I need someone to talk to. I decide to drop by Manny. Manny is a Belgian development worker who has been through a lot. For years he has been involved in various Philippine projects relating to workers' education. Manny exudes tranquility and confidence and brings me at ease anew."



October 22. We consult with Delen and Dyeri at the Council and write to our friends at *Bevrijde Wereld*. It is clear that this is an orchestrated disinformation campaign. We deem it wiser not to react, and wait calmly till the storm passes. Nevertheless, we realize that the organizations we are working for are now being closely watched.

The *Daily Globe* article has a history. On May 4, 1987, the Heritage Foundation, a U.S. think-tank with links with the CIA, published a document entitled, "The international anti-Aquino network: a threat to Philippine democracy". Without presenting any evidence, the report asserted that yearly the communist movement receives millions of dollars from support groups and front organizations in the U.S. and Western Europe. The think-tank proposes to support the Aquino regime by informing Western governments about the activities of these so-called CPP fronts in their respective countries.

Three months later, 13 Belgian missionaries from Scheut (CICM) who are working in the Philippines write a letter to Cardinal Danneels and to Andre Kempinaire, minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. The letter was leaked to the *Manila Times*. The missionaries claimed that the money given by 11.11.11 Campaign and by *Broederlijk Delen* (Brotherly Sharing) was being diverted to subversive goals. They also named the CPHC. Alarmed, they noted that the Council makes a connection between ill health and poverty and exploitation. Ergo, that is an indisputable proof of links with the communists.

In November 1987 the Philippine press reported new accusations of foreign, including Belgian, support to the CPP. A dossier written by a certain Andre Bellessort was circulated, with the title, "CPP solidarity network: the Utrecht Connection". Once again 11.11.11 and *Broederlijk Delen* were attacked, including other solidarity organizations, like the "Maoist" *Partij van de Arbeid van België* (Workers' Party of Belgium) and the *Anti-Imperialistische Bond* (AIB, Anti-Imperialist League).

The scenario being painted by the Heritage Foundation has been followed closely. At the summit between the European Community and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in early May 1998 in Dusseldorf, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tindemans, met with his Filipino counterpart Raul Manglapus. He promised Manglapus that he would "actively stop the support from Belgium to the NPA".

## A Home Of Our Own

December 2. Rita is in Baguio, attending a national conference of the Council. I stay home to write a project proposal. In my diary to Rita I write:



"Tonight I dreamt that you were back, but only to leave for another conference the coming Monday. And also that we had a son, blond and with blue eyes. I had been to the countryside, yet he recognized me when I came home. Sorry, honey, but the cute baby of Lando and Evelyn next door and the reading of John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*, a great part of which is about giving birth and babies (and abortions), I have become all the more conscious how eager I am to have a baby with you. At the office yesterday Bel was asking about our relationship, how long we have known each other, how many children we want, etc. Please come back as soon as possible."

December 4. Now that it is sure that we will remain working in Manila, Rita and I decide to rent our own apartment. We are happy to have our own nest. It is small, no more than a big room divided into three by wooden partitions.

Rita writes to her sister Hilde:

"We have finally moved to a new house, and it is really pleasant. Every morning we can now go straight to the bathroom without having to wait for our turn. No more zoo under the kitchen table. More space. Using somebody else's facilities was not fun anymore. Aside from the few things that we brought with us from Belgium, we used to have only a flat iron, a table lamp and a set of kitchen utensils. Now more have been added: a mattress, a stove, an electric fan, buckets, cutlery, a bamboo bookcase, a bamboo salon, two rattan chairs, a small study table, a kitchen table with four stools and, as a showpiece, a refrigerator!

But yet it is not heaven on earth. Living next door is the sister of Freddie Aguilar. Her *katulong* does nothing but sing along at the top of her lungs with the same cassette tape of her *kuya* Freddie, be it late at night or early in the morning. Going to work has become laborious. All jeepneys are already full when they pass by here, and along the way the traffic is heavy. We spend more than an hour travelling. Another negative point: we have more cockroaches."

### Filipino Christmas

It is the height of the Christmas season here. That is not just one day nor a period of a couple of weeks. No. Christmas lasts here a month or longer. In fact, you can already speak of Christmas as soon as the month ends with -ber. September, that is. Business establishments that are not decorated for Christmas by October are probably going bankrupt. After All Saint's Day you start hearing Christmas songs everywhere, and even before December you can add to every "Good morning" a "Merry Christmas" greeting.

The Christmas holiday is observed exuberantly here. For weeks people are busy hunting for gifts and food. The historical and anthropological explanation is



that this is a ritual of sharing wealth and a way of strengthening ties. In reality, though, the opposite is achieved: because of the strong emphasis on consumption, Christmas only accentuates the gap between the rich and the poor.

A little example from the newspaper. The Flores family (three children, the father works as a moneychanger) buys for Christmas 3,500 pesos worth of new clothes and shoes. That is equivalent to a month's salary. On Christmas eve a shopping spree is made in a luxury shopping center: 3,100 pesos is spent. The Christmas dinner, consisting of "exotic" products such as a giant ham, a ball of yellow cheese, oranges and apples, costs more than 1,500 pesos.

People who are less fortunate than the Floreses, like our colleagues at work for instance, collect their last pesos, borrow money and become indebted just to be able to join in the orgy of gift-giving, new clothes and food. The more enterprising souls try to earn extra money in the months before Christmas by selling home-made fruit cakes, toys or firecrackers for the New Year's celebration.

But those side jobs entail time. And because you can never buy all those many gifts just outside work hours, not to mention the careful wrapping of these gifts, office work in December is practically at a standstill.

### **The CPP's Birthday**

December 15. Ella pays us a visit in our new house. She brings with her some secret documents that we may read, among them the three-year (1988-1990) plan of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Fortunately, she helps us go through the texts, for all of them are in Tagalog. The three-year program is very ambitious. The CPP is convinced that the membership will be doubled by the year 1990.

December 26. A summary of the CPP statement on the occasion of its 20th founding anniversary appears in the press. "It is reasonable to aim for the total victory of the national-democratic revolution within 10 years," asserts the Party confidently. The NPA is active in 63 of the country's 73 provinces. About 12,000 of the 41,000 *barangays*, or villages, are under the influence of the revolutionary movement. The Party presents a figure of 35,000 members and a mass base of 10 million, one-sixth of the Philippine population. Mass base means people who live in areas covered by the guerrilla territory and who are active in the underground or legal people's organizations led or influenced by the communist party. According to these figures, the support for the revolution has increased by 11 percent in the previous year.

Data on the size of the NPA differ from 7,000 full-time fighters (CPP figures) to 25,000 members (government figures), of which two-thirds are armed. From the CPP documents recently captured by the government military, it appears that the



NPA is operating in company-size strength (90-120 men and women) in tens of guerrilla fronts and even have two battalions (300-500 men and women) in the recent period. The armed city partisans have brought the people's war into the capital, and consecutive and coordinated guerrilla actions have caused the enemy heavy losses. The international press is also aware that the Philippine guerrilla movement is doing well. Newsweek writes in a cover story that the NPA is getting the upper hand.

### Propaganda War

During her State of the Nation address of July 25, President Aquino declared that "1988 will be remembered as the year when the rebellion was broken". The year is nearing its end, but Defense Minister Ramos is giving himself an allowance up to the year 1992, the year that Aquino's term ends.

The army is working on a new counterrevolutionary strategy. Ramos: "The principle is no longer military action or killing of NPAs alone, but also service to the people and the setting up of livelihood projects."

This "total strategy" has been worked out by Colonel Victor Corpus. Corpus became a celebrity of sorts when he, as a young officer, defected to the NPA in 1970, bringing with him a truck full of weapons. But after his arrest in 1976, he went back to the military establishment. He is now trying to use his knowledge of guerrilla warfare against his former comrades. He dreams of a quick military victory against the NPA, as a "dialectical" answer to the guerrillas' protracted people's war. Corpus copies the guerrilla concept of armed propaganda units, small teams that primarily undertake organizing work among the people. The government army calls them Special Operation Teams (SOTs), 7 to 12 soldiers in plainclothes tasked to integrate in the "communist-infiltrated" villages. There they carry out social investigation, civic action, and propaganda and espionage activities: terms that spontaneously bring up the image of the CIA. The CIA has rendered lots of services for the Philippines, reaching its height during the successful fight against the Huk rebellion. The Huks (from *hukbo*, army) launched a guerrilla war against the Japanese colonizers during the Second World War. Afterwards, it became a generalized peasant rebellion against the landowners and against the Philippine regime. The Americans decided to interfere and the CIA's Colonel Edward Lansdale, stationed in Manila, groomed Ramon Magsaysay to become first a populist Defense Minister and later the President. With CIA help the man succeeded in using limited reforms, lots of rhetoric and effective psychological warfare to cut the grass from under the Huks' feet.

Thirty years later the CIA sees a new role paved for it. Since Aquino's ascension to power the personnel of the CIA station in Manila has been increased to 127 units. The U.S. government has allocated 10 million dollars extra for secret



operations. The U.S. propaganda machinery is maintaining a strong presence in the Philippines and the American Peace Corps volunteers have their biggest mission here. The U.S. Information Service in Manila puts out nine publications, including in the Tagalog and Cebuano languages, and has its own radio program.

Already for months, a television series called *Buhay* (Living) has been on the air five nights a week. The benign and tough lieutenant colonel Lozano stands as a model for the soldier's heroism and commitment to public service. His opponent, the sly and merciless guerrilla Rod, symbolizes the evil, the NPA. Another TV series, *K: Alien Rule*, goes a step further. It paints a picture of the Philippines under a future communist terror rule. Both series are produced by the Civil Relations Service of the Philippine armed forces.

In the cinemas the film *Dante* is being shown. The former leader of the NPA is presented as a cold fish, the guerrilla as a motley crew that is always on the run from the government's army. A small commotion is caused by the promotional material for the film *Dante*, as the subtitle says "defender of the oppressed". Almost a week passes by before this mistake is corrected and the sentence is removed.

The army has a lot to do to polish its image. Who would believe their allegation that in the Visayan islands alone, 1,000 priests and nuns are NPA commanders? The death or surrender of one of the priests, Frank Navarro, has repeatedly been announced. The man has had to go out of his way to declare everytime, from his jungle camp, just like Mark Twain, that any news about his death was grossly exaggerated.







## **Chapter Three**

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### **The Medical Department of the NPA 1989**

#### **Pregnant**

January 1989. Rita and I really feel good about living and working in the Philippines. For Chinese-Filipinos it is the year of the snake, a lucky sign. Right, because the snake is going to bring us a baby in August! Out of fear for another miscarriage, we delay sharing the news with people back home. Very un-Filipino.

Efren, the jack-of-all-trades in the Council, has just received a letter from his wife who works as a teacher on the remote island of Romblon. She is eleven days delayed. The whole staff of the Council learns about it and an agreement is made to hold a party the moment she reaches her second month of pregnancy. Rita and I can no longer remain silent about our pregnancy. Cheers reverberate in the office.

In a New Year's letter, Rita's sister Hilde and my sister Hilde and brother-in-law Philip say they are taking up the announcement "Free room for rent in Manila" that we placed in our newsletter. We won't be much alone in the coming months.

#### **Guerrilla vacation**

January 10. Ella is standing at the front door. She has a message from Lean, the head of the medical section of the NPA. She asks if I would like to attend a medical training among the guerrillas for a longer period. Lean together with Andrea and two other members of the section are leaving on January 19 for a guerrilla zone in Bicol, an elongated peninsula that connects Luzon with the Visayan islands. If I want, I can come along for about three weeks. And I can also give a course on anesthesia. Lean immediately hands over copies of the course on anesthesia for NPA medics, in Tagalog.

I have no greater wish than to go back to the guerrillas, although I'm really not comfortable giving a course in Tagalog and on a subject about which I am not very knowledgeable. Neither am I inclined to leave Rita alone, pregnant and fearful of a new miscarriage. The biggest difficulty perhaps is how I can take three weeks off from my work in the Council.



The following day I sound out Dyeri at the office. If I work very hard for a number of days I can finish my project--the putting together of a text on pharmacology--ahead of schedule. I tell Dyeri vaguely that I want to visit a number of development projects of Belgian NGOs in the countryside. He agrees. The style of work here is more project-based and, therefore, not bound by strict office hours.

I go home in a good mood. At once I bury myself in a course book on anesthesia and a dictionary.

## Bicol

January 19. A young female courier of the guerrillas travels all the way to Manila to pick up Lean, Andrea, Apol and me. We take a domestic flight to Naga City.

Lean suggests that I use a different name for every region I visit. Goodbye, Ka Pedro. This time I consciously choose a guerrilla name with a meaning: Ka Miguel, in honor of Michael De Witte, and proud that I can somehow follow in his footsteps. Miguel is also a reminder of Miguel Enriquez, the leader of the Chilean revolutionary organization MIR, killed in 1974 in a firefight with Pinochet's military.

We stay for two days in quarantine in Naga, in the house of an *alyado*, or an ally of the movement. Immediately going to the interior would attract too much attention. Lina, a likeable woman with shoulder-length gray hair and big owl-like glasses, keeps us company. She heads the Regional Health Bureau of the Communist Party in Bicol. With a loud and determined voice, she arranges the last preparations for our trip: raincoats, vehicles, messengers, armed guides, food for the trip.

Forced by circumstances to stay inside the house without anything to do – I find it disagreeable. The only pastime in the house is the komiks, comic strips for adults, and the TV. I can't stand it for long, it is all stereotyped, violent, sexist.

Another *alyado* arrives on the second night to pick us up with a car. Aside from Lina and our guide, there are two young men with us. After an hour's drive we are dropped off the roadside, with boxes full of medicines, medical supplies and photocopied course materials. Our companions walk up a small hill in front of us. An armed escort waits for us in a hut. Also, the two young men, who introduce themselves as Ka Toto and Ka Bong, are now each carrying an M-16. How daring, just less than 100 meters from the main road where military vehicles can pass by! But our guide explains to us that the organizational work



of the NPA reaches right up to the main road, and that the entire population here supports the NPA.

For five hours it was walking up and down one hill after another, one moment through muddy forest paths and the next through high thorny grasses. We pass by huts and solitary houses. Poor but clean is the motto here. Every house has a well-kept yard with flowers and plants, and on the windows hang orchids. These are grown on a thick piece of young coconut bark on which eggshells are put to provide calcium nutrients. Everywhere the inhabitants are hospitable and friendly. Toto and Bong are glad to chat with the people, and we are offered a glass of water in every house. Meeting armed guerrilla fighters appears to be the most common practice for the peasants of Bicol.

It begins to rain as the night falls. Beginning to feel the fatigue, I start to slip and fall more than I walk. I notice that Lean and the other comrades from the city are also finding it difficult. But the NPAs, heavily laden with backpacks and rifles and with slippers or bare feet, do not have the least difficulty with the terrain. They must find us city people really clumsy wretches.

We are awaited in the dark by Ka Louie, a thin, bemoustached man in T-shirt, shorts and army boots. Ka Louie is the secretary of the regional NPA command in Bicol. Like in Quezon, arrival in a guerrilla camp is a surprise. Slow rock from the '70s come out of a cassette recorder, and Ka Louie offers us a shot of whisky as a welcome gesture. "Received from an *alyado*," he winks at us.

Ka Lean, who always thinks of everything, asks if we can be briefed about the security situation in the zone before sleeping. Ka Louie laughs, sips his whisky and says: "Don't worry about anything. The Main Regional Guerrilla Unit of the NPA in Bicol, which is the size of a company, with more than 90 fighters, is based in this guerrilla zone. In the district where we are, an NPA platoon comprising around 30 men also operates. Then there are the various small armed propaganda units, from 5 to 12 kasama each. And the regional NPA headquarters that is based here in the neighborhood has still its own staff company. Your security is more than guaranteed. More so because the population in these areas is fully consolidated."

A consolidated population? What can that be?

"That means that revolutionary organizations of peasants, women and youth have been established in all the villages, and there are no more hostile elements. In Bicol, our contacts among the politicians are so good that today we have most of the mayors, a congressman and even a provincial governor who could be counted as friends of the revolution."



But we have to be vigilant, Lean insists.

Ka Louie glows with self-confidence. "We have nothing to fear from the government army. The nearest enemy detachment is 15 kilometers away. We are at the moment concentrating on organizational work, there have been no military actions here since last year. Hence, the enemy is not aware of our presence."

We can sleep soundly. Lean has brought a hammock for me. No ordinary hammock, but a guerrilla hammock, made out of super-thin parachute material. It takes up almost no space and dries fast. As surgeon and an experienced NPA, Ka Apol knows how to tie a few knots. He teaches me how to sturdily hang a hammock. I sleep like a log.

### **On the retreat**

January 22. The heavy downpour prevents me from getting to explore the camp. After a breakfast of fried rice and fish that has been heavily salted and dried (called tuyo), I take a long bath in a little underground river. You have to clamber down over steep rocks to reach it. It is cool in the cave and the rain adds to the chill. The water is as cold as a Swiss mountain river.

I have just started to soap myself when Ka Lina calls me. There was an armed encounter that morning just a few kilometers from the camp. We have to leave. Silently I curse Ka Louie who told us that the situation was under control. I hurry up from the bathing area and quickly pack my things.

We now receive detailed instructions: password, the assembly place and the order for the four marching formations. Can I remember all that? Will I understand the Tagalog? Will I even hear the orders? Fortunately, we are each assigned a buddy, a comrade from whom one must never be out of sight. For the first time, I hear NPA units called with military terms. The American Alpha-Bravo-Charlie becomes Abe-Baking-Kaloy in Tagalog. Everyone must fill a sock in the kitchen with uncooked rice. Each one gets two cans of sardines in tomato sauce. That way you always have provisions even if you are separated from the group, and you don't come empty-handed when knocking at poor peasants' homes.

It is all very exciting. I realize concretely what guerrilla war is all about. As if to prove to myself that I am not nervous, I take my pulse: 68, hardly any faster than normal. I feel safe in the company of the experienced Ka Lean and Ka Apol and a whole company of well-trained NPA fighters.

We begin an organized tactical retreat. With the fighting unit, the staff of Ka Louie, the medics who are already present for the training and the Medical



Section of Ka Lean, there are all in all 66 people and two dogs. A big group, carrying pots, pans, boxes of medical materials, sacks of rice and dried fish.

After three hours or so, we reach a big, well-concealed cave that cuts right through a mountain wall. Right after the entrance, there is an area of maybe 10 by 3 meters where we can stand up. At the back going outside there is a corridor which you can only pass by crouching single file, and in places, one even has to crawl on hands and feet.

The kasama know what to do. They line the cave with branches and dig a canal to drain the water and hang a couple of petroleum lamps that brighten up the dark hall. At the foot of the hill are houses of the masa, people who sympathize with the guerrillas. A few kasama go there to cook rice. The sardines are opened as soon as they come back with their giant pots. Leaves and pieces of trunk of the banana plant are used as plates. After eating, a few helpful kasama bring me some palm leaves to serve as a bed against the hard, cold rocky ground. I cannot sleep until I take out my hammock in the middle of the night and tie it to a couple of sturdy stalactites.

January 23. We remain hidden in the cave. Boring. And outside, it continues to pour. I have to go to the toilet. I walk into the woods in my wet rubber shoes and come back to the cave soaking wet. It is damn well not easy, this guerrilla life.

Fortunately, there are Lean, Andrea, and Apol. And Ka Rina. This small but spirited woman is one of the leading cadres and has one of the most beautiful voices in Bicol. She sings for us many revolutionary and melancholy songs, and after each song comes a mischievous laughter of pure pleasure. Ka Rina is now almost fifteen years with the guerrillas. Her husband is a top cadre in the region, she says. Aside from her voice and her infectious humor, Rina has three valuable things with her in the guerrilla zone: a Sony radio with world receiver, a Scrabble set, and tea.

Information about the armed encounter reaches us in dribs and drabs, through scouts or through the walkie-talkie. We hear on the radio that there were three NPA fighters and one military soldier who have been killed, but we get neither confirmation nor denial from our own people. And the enemy moves in our direction. We have to leave again, regardless of the weather. At around 4 o'clock, our guerrilla column sets out for a march that is difficult because it is wet and dark. No one says where the journey leads or how long it will last. Under these circumstances, no questions are asked.

At around 10 p.m. we stop to eat and to take some rest. Ka Louie calls me. What an idea to choose exactly this moment to have a discussion with his



foreign visitor. Or does he only want to put me at ease? Louie tries to start a conversation with me but I fall over out of exhaustion. The food arrives: a plate of steaming rice with sardines in tomato sauce. After the meal I take a nap, leaning on my backpack.

But we have to move on. We walk from 2 to 5 in the morning. With such a big group we can only move forward slowly. We cannot afford to make any noise or use lamps. In complete silence we stop near three houses. After an hour's wait the reconnaissance team gives a signal. We can stay overnight in these houses. Half of us in hammocks beside, above and under each other, the other half on the floor. Ka Bong shows me the place of honor: the wooden kitchen table.

We can rest here a few days. Time to wash ourselves and our clothes in the river and chat some more with the young NPAs. There is laughter and card playing, washing and cooking. The kasama also use the rest period to clean their weapons. Next to his rifle, the backpack is the most important possession of the guerrilla. All his meagre belongings are in the backpack, his whole life. A bundle of clothes, a hammock, a few toiletries. Maybe a couple of yellowed photos or some cherished letters from family members. For the medics, some medicines and a stethoscope, a medical pocketbook in the best case. Because of the wet climate all their belongings are neatly wrapped in plastic.

We wait for the enemy's withdrawal before retracing our steps so that we can start the medical training. We also wait for the food. The logistical lines to our new bivouac are not yet in order. The meals consist at first of rice and tuyo or sardines. Then just rice with salt and Vetsin, the unhealthy monosodium glutamate that is particularly popular in the Chinese and Filipino cuisine, including that of the guerrillas. And finally we get only rice. I have difficulty swallowing that, so I use my "strategic reserve": a small box of raisins I have brought with me from Manila.

### **The people's war**

January 24. We make a virtue out of necessity by asking Ka Louie to explain to us the situation of the revolution in Bicol. Lean, Andrea, Apol and I gather around him.

"The Bicol region consists of five guerrilla fronts. Each front covers between five to ten municipalities and is divided into three to five districts, each of which in turn consists of three to five sections. To be able to speak of a guerrilla front the following preconditions must be fulfilled: the region must be sufficiently inhabited and the population is organized; the enemy is weak or absent; the terrain is favorable (mountainous and/or forested); and there are



already party structures. Within a front a distinction can be made between a guerrilla zone, where the organizational level is not yet advanced, and a guerrilla base, where the population is strongly organized and also has its people's militia."

I want to know what is the troop strength of the guerrillas in relation to the geographical division: front—district—section.

"To begin with, the NPA must be able to avail of a wide room for maneuver," says Ka Louie. "And when the enemy attacks, it must be able to fall back on other guerrilla fronts and units for support. Look at it this way: If the NPA makes three breaches, the enemy cannot seal these with two hands. That's why the guerrilla units are spread out. Three of the five fronts in Bicol already have their own NPA company. Aside from that, an NPA platoon operates in most guerrilla districts. Apart from these regular units, the people's militia in the region can mobilize 5,000 men and women. We have an organized mass base of 130,000 people in Bicol. The situation is ripe for an expansion of the people's war. But we have a shortage of weapons."

How does Ka Louie see the future development of the struggle for liberation?

"The protracted people's war is still in the stage of the strategic defensive. Militarily, the government army is still superior to the guerrilla movement. To reach the next stage, that of the strategic stalemate, it suffices that every guerrilla front has a company and every important region an NPA battalion, equipped with enough heavy weapons to be able to deliver decisive blows against the enemy. From there it can rapidly go to the strategic offensive, until total victory."

I frown. Ka Louie seems to measure the advance of the revolution solely by the growth of the firepower of the NPA. He continues:

"At the moment the NPA operates in battalion strength in two regions: Northern Luzon and Samar. But Bicol is not far behind militarily, as we have shown during a large-scale, nationally coordinated NPA campaign in the summer of 1987, when we blew up three strategic bridges."

Ka Lean counters that the blowing up of the bridges had brought a lot of negative reactions from the people who live alongside the main road, which is the main artery of the narrow province of Bicol. But Ka Louie dismisses her argument with a smile. "The most important thing is that the enemy was alarmed that we could do something like that. The government army went on a counteroffensive from November '87 to May '88. We lost 58 men in three



months. But in the face of that enemy offensive we have strengthened ourselves militarily. We have learned to withstand attacks and the enemy was not able to achieve its objective of hitting the regional CPP leadership."

A doubtful example of dialectics: to receive blows and still evaluate it positively! But is it not one-sided to speak of the people's war in purely military terms?

Ka Louie answers: "Aside from military work it is of crucial importance for the guerrilla army to continuously consolidate its mass base, to strengthen it. The fish, the guerrilla, can indeed only thrive in water, the mass base. Hence, in the yearly program of every NPA unit, time is provided for mass work. The NPA is a political army and, thus, takes part in organizational work, in production and in cultural work with the people. After the devastation brought by the latest typhoon Sisang, for example, the NPA in Bicol distributed 100 cavans of rice and 100 straw mats to the people. I have personally seen to it that 40% of the budget of the regional NPA company went to helping the affected population."

### **Land reform**

January 25. I look for Ka Louie again, because I still want an answer to a question that is of crucial importance: the solution to the land problem. What is the situation in Bicol regarding this?

"Bicol is one of the poorest regions in the Philippines," says Ka Louie. "The peasants earn hardly enough to survive as tenants in rice farms and coconut plantations. Landlordism remains the number one problem, and it is only revolutionary land reform that offers a workable answer. The maximum program of our land reform is the confiscation of the land of the big landlord and its distribution among the peasants. But in the past, this was sometimes too rapidly and too radically implemented. This engendered strong reactions from the landlord militia or from the army, which were beyond the current ability of the NPA and the local population to resist.

"So this is the reason why in this stage, what is mostly implemented is the minimum program: lower land rent for the benefit of the tenants, higher wages for the agricultural workers, lower interest rates for loans, and higher prices for agricultural products. These measures can often be carried out by the legal peasant organizations while the NPA stays in the background as a distant threat, a big stick. This way the self-confidence and countervailing power of the peasants are strengthened and the repression against their organizations stays at a minimum.



"The first step in this process of acquiring power by the poor peasant is often almost insignificant," says Ka Louie further. "But creatively original is how, for instance, coconuts are kept back during harvest: the peasant climbs the tree at night and brings down the nuts silently with a rope. Since in the normal manner, cutting the nuts and letting it fall to the ground creates a lot of noise and would give away the peasant.

"One step further is negotiation with the landlord, whereby the peasants stand up for their rights. In this manner the revolutionary movement in Bicol has reversed the tenancy relations from an average one-third for the peasant and two-thirds for the owner of the land, to a more livable two-thirds for the tenant and one-third for the landlord."

### **Ka Nelia**

January 26. The coast is clear, the enemy has withdrawn. In small groups we return to our base. The rain stops for a while, and being able to walk during the day is a great relief. Still I have to be alert, since everyone must keep a distance of ten meters from the person ahead of him, so as not to be spotted as a group from afar.

After walking three hours we reach our home, our mountain cave. For the next few days we will have to build the camp. During our absence a few kasama did excellent work. A generator was brought up. Two bulbs illuminate the dark room, a radio plays and a big pot hangs above the fire. I am as happy as a lark when Ka Rina hands me a cup of tea.

I am not telling anyone that it is my birthday today, but I enjoy it. I write in my diary: "I begin to understand how Rita said once in an interview that she felt completely happy among the Salvadoran guerrillas. Life here is a total break with everything, so that I don't actually miss anything. I have the feeling of taking part in something important. The concrete achievements of the revolution show how much it is worth the trouble. And there is the warm comradeship. But it could perhaps also be that your horizon narrows with the guerrillas. It may sound strange, but you live here actually a bit like a king in a beautiful but limited world. From that small, secluded world, to have the ambition to change the entire society is a real challenge."

The idyll of my small guerrilla world is broken when we receive more details from an NPA patrol team via the walkie-talkie about the armed encounter a few days ago. It was an unexpected attack by an enemy army patrol on a small NPA camp. Amid exchanges of gunfire the entire guerrilla unit managed to escape. Except for Ka Nelia whose leg was hit by a bullet.



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Frustrated because their prey escaped, the military rained machinegun fire from a helicopter at a nearby hut. The inhabitants ran for their lives. Ka Nelia is the only victim on our side. The "three dead on the NPA side", which the government radio announced, was just an example of psychological warfare.

January 27. Ka Toto comes with the whole story of Nelia. So as not to fall into the hands of the military, the seriously wounded Ka Nelia rolled down a slope and covered herself with leaves. She stayed in hiding for three days. When a peasant found her, she had been much weakened because of loss of blood, the pain, the hunger and thirst. Ka Bong, the chief medic of the NPA in the area, went in the deep of the night to the house where he was to give the wounded first aid.

Ka Lina seeks radio contact with Ka Bong. Ka Bong reports that Nelia has an ugly leg fracture that needs thorough cleaning under anesthesia. It is impossible to bring Ka Nelia "outside", to a hospital. That will undoubtedly lead to her arrest. This is because the military systematically post men at the entrance of all hospitals in the neighborhood after every armed encounter, to look for wounded NPAs.

"Bring Ka Nelia as far as possible 'inside', to a safe place", Lina orders Bong over the radio. "Let me know your coordinates, then we will get to you with the necessary medical materials."

January 28. Because the medical training cannot start yet--a new camp must be built and it is raining hard again--I may go along to Ka Nelia. I am excited: to help treat a wounded guerrilla!

Three of us go: Ka Lina, myself, and Ka Maricel, the wife of Bong and also a medic. After a forced march of a day and a steep climb up a slippery, muddy path, we reach the highest hut in the entire area. A wounded person can stay here safely for a long period.

Ka Nelia lies on the bamboo floor under a blanket. She is a beautiful, strong, young woman with magnificent long hair. Despite the pain, she succeeds in conjuring a faint smile on her pale face. Unavoidably, I think of Rita who had found herself in the same situation at the opposite side of the globe, in El Salvador, a few years ago.

Ka Bong is no longer here. He has gone 'outside', to buy anesthetic for Nelia. But we cannot wait for that, infection may get into the open leg wound. Lina and Maricel perform a quick surgical wound cleaning under local anesthesia. I observe and give a few instructions. A piece of bone, five centimeters in length, comes out of the wound. The bullet had penetrated both



bones of the lower leg, tibia and fibula. We set a temporary traction with the help of strong plaster cast. But the healing process will take months. I ask myself whether this is possible in the guerrilla zone.

Nelia had already received intravenous antibiotics for a few days and for the first time, she no longer has fever today. During treatment of the wound, which is very painful, Ka Nelia keeps her exceptionally high spirits. She finds support in the songs that Ka Nilog, her husband and the commandant of the district unit, sings softly to her. Just like Rita who endured the pain with the music of Silvio Rodriguez. The wound is covered with an herbal mixture that appears to have the quality of dissolving pus.

In our little hut we are waiting for Godot, who in this scenario goes by the name of Bong. A while later it is not Bong but a couple of kasama who appear, bringing with them nutritious food for the patient: powdered soup of Knorr and a few eggs. The kasama teach me Pusoy Dos, a Filipino card game. But what I don't do is to take a bath in the small river far below us, what with the rain and that muddy path. Only when I have to have a quick pee do I dare go out.

January 30. Finally a team arrives with better medical equipment. Now Lina and Maricel can carry out a thorough surgical cleaning. But there is no ketamine, an anesthetic that we need. So we have to be content with Valium and a strong morphine-like painkiller. The wound looks clean, we have been able to prevent infection.

### **Before the class**

January 31. Ka Lina and I leave Nelia to the good care of Maricel and crawl into our soaking clothes, socks and shoes to go back to the base camp. Rain, rain, rain: will there be no end to it? I remember that, in Omar Cabezas' the long march through the mountains about the Sandinista guerrillas, it also seemed to be always raining.

The camp where we again meet Lean, Andrea and Apol is a big mud pool. Ka Louie has left on a mission, it is unsure whether we would see him again. Due to the bad weather many structures in the camp have not yet been finished, let alone that the course would have been started already. The camp's shower is again situated deep in a cave. I am happy that I can finally wash myself, but I get dirty again because I have to crawl out of the shower through a slippery rocky path.

February 1. I join in the rebuilding of the camp. I have the task to braid two-by-two palm leaves coated with mud to form as roofing. No easy job and for the school building a few hundreds of such braided palm leaves are needed.



The roofing of our small huts, on the other hand, consists of pieces of the stem of the banana plant, adroitly cut in the middle so that no rain can penetrate. But this plant decays too, as I will later discover to my dismay. My hammock hangs exactly from the ridge of the ceiling. In the middle of the night a rotten banana stem of the roof suddenly collapses. A big blob of ice-cold rainwater that had collected there pours directly into my hammock. A terrible shiver goes through my entire body. My hammock and my clothes are wet. Ka Apol helps me repair the roof in the dark and in the rain.

The never-ending rain hampers the delivery of provisions and limits us to a diet of rice and dried fish. I am sick of that tuyo. The young NPAs are also becoming less enthusiastic. Ka Louie knows who he's dealing with and orders a couple of bottles of cheap gin from the village.

February 2. Yippee, the sun is shining. Now that the weather is improving, different groups of course participants arrive. Exuberant welcome rituals, much laughter and conversation ensue immediately. The newcomers help put the finishing touches on the camp so that we can begin at once with the lessons. An ample food provision also arrives, including a pig that is expertly slaughtered right away. Ka Bong has also arrived. Not only with ketamine but with a cassette of Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush*, and also a yet more valuable jewel: a newspaper not yet a week old. I wait for my turn, then I read the newspaper, swinging in my hammock under a friendly sun. What more could I ask for?

February 3. They sit on the school benches, all 27 of them. The students, mostly between 20 and 25 years of age, vary quite sharply in level. Only a few are trained medics, the others are totally new in this field. Some kasama have difficulty in following the lessons, they do not concentrate much and are easily distracted. As children of poor peasants, most of our students have never gotten the chance to finish even elementary schooling. So the lesson goes at snail's pace. A student first reads the text aloud, paragraph by paragraph. The teacher repeats this in his own words and gives a few words of explanation. Because the students copy exactly everything what is written on the board, the teacher has to be very careful with the use of the blackboard.

February 6. I am a little fidgety, as I have to give a medical lesson for the first time in my life. And then about anesthesia, and in Tagalog! Fortunately Ka Lean is there to help me when needed.

Apol and I try to liven up the boring subject by didactic use of banana stems, coconuts or bamboo. With all this we can visualize, for example, how to administer anesthesia into the spinal cord. To hold the attention of the students, I also mix a few better known political terms into my medical lecture. I make



milliliter (ml) into Marxism-Leninism (ML). The choice between a normal, vertical incision for a Caesarean section and an unnoticeable bikini incision, I refer to a choice between a proletarian and a bourgeois incision. And whether ketamine's effect of increasing the blood pressure is an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the condition of the patient is, of course, a good illustration of Mao's dialectics.

Our pupils are eager to learn. Their questions and stories keep the lessons lively. They tell of cases that they themselves have already handled or of folk medicines used in their areas.

But after a few days, the participants find difficulty with the strict schedule (from 8 to 12 a.m. and from 2 to 7 p.m.) and the heavy subject matter. A few complain of headache. Without being noticed, the lessons start late and the pauses become longer.

### **The hospital at work**

February 9. After the theoretical part the students are divided into five surgical teams. Each group can practice for a day on a dog. All aspects of the operation, up to the minutest details, are prepared for and carried out as if it concerned a human patient, with attention to sterilizing, carefulness and teamwork. The only thing missing is the speed of real surgeons. The anesthesia goes well. I am happy that my slowest assistant anesthetist, Ka Gene, appears to master his arithmetic. For a few nights I have had to give him extra tutorials.

February 13. Right before we are about to begin with a real patient, a Sikorsky helicopter flies over the camp. The camp leadership orders us to pack all our belongings and to be ready for evacuation. But the marching orders do not come.

The following days we walk every day before sun-up to a forested mountainside. As soon as the coast is clear, at around 8 o'clock, we go down for breakfast and... operations! Most of the patients are NPAs who have been waiting for years to be treated. They come here from the different guerrilla fronts of Bicol to be operated on. We cannot disappoint them, just because of one helicopter.

One day we do a hernia operation, the next day a hysterectomy. It is the newly trained medics who perform the operations, with minimal supervision and a helping hand from Ka Apol for surgery, and from me for anesthesia. During the hysterectomy another helicopter flies over. We hurry with stitching up the abdomen, arrange for the transport of the patient and send the still waiting and the newly operated patients ahead to safer places.



It is a false alarm, and for the rest of the patients we can finish at a leisurely pace: just two more hernia operations--this is common here due to hiking with heavy burdens--and two sterilizations. A few medics also visit Ka Nelia, to help make a cast that has a window in it for the cleaning of the wound. This way she is more mobile if ever the enemy comes near.

February 20. My first medical training with the NPA is over. During the final evaluation I am told that I am at times too harsh when pointing out mistakes, which could be painful in Philippine culture. But it is true. I just found it difficult to hold myself when I saw some of the treatment that the medics or even Ka Apol give. They prescribe antibiotics for the simplest cough. And for a guerrilla who is somewhat tired, an intravenous treatment with dextrose is immediately set up. This is terrible for someone who has worked for months on a course on rational drug use. I am also indignant that in the Philippine guerrilla zones, one of the rare places in the world where one cannot find CocaCola, the pharmaceutical industry still has its influence. Like the Nestlé powdered milk for Ka Sally's baby in Quezon.

### Homebound

Lean's Medical Section stays behind for a few more days for the post-operative care, but a special arrangement is found for me to go 'outside'. A month with the guerrillas flies fast. A short but emotional goodbye from Lina, Bong, Maricel, Gene and the other medics, the kitchen staff and Ka Rina, who still manages to belt out an impromptu song.

Ka Toto brings me to the main road, about three hours further. He now looks like an ordinary peasant boy, in shorts and T-shirt and with only an inconspicuous traveling bag. But I know that he carries a revolver under his shorts. We pass by the empty hut that, one month ago, was shot at by an army helicopter. We see clearly the bullet marks in the wooden walls and the rocky ground.

Our destination is a house near the highway. There, to my surprise, I stumble upon Ka Louie. The man is sewing NPA uniforms on an old Singer. Unbelievable: a commander who sits behind a sewing machine for his men! I say goodbye to him and distribute my last raisins to the children in the house. At the appointed time a car with dimmed lights arrives to pick me up and bring me safely back to Naga City. I am itching to be home: the mail, the papers, ice cream, the forthcoming visit of my sister-in-law Hilde with fresh news from Belgium, and especially my pregnant wife.



February 21. Manila. I skim through the newspapers looking for news about a military encounter in Bicol one month ago. I cannot believe my eyes as I see the big headline in the Manila Chronicle of January 23: "Top rebel leader killed". An "important military offensive" against a "big NPA camp with around 70 rebels" is described. The "highest communist leader" of the province was supposedly killed, together with a woman NPA and three others. The woman NPA, that must be Ka Nelia. She is, however, very much alive--although still with a plaster cast--in the guerrilla zone. The rest of the article is pure figment of the imagination.

### **Negros again**

Just like in Belgium the summer months in the Philippines coincide with the warmest months of the year. But here those are April and May, including the Holy Week. Many Manileños then go to the province with their children. A number of the Council staff members also hide away somewhere so that it is not noticeable if I do the same. For Lean has asked me to give my anesthesia course again, this time in Negros. I have been looking forward to know Negros also from the "inside".

There is one hitch, though: my sister Hilde and brother-in-law Philip are coming on March 24 for an integration visit to the Philippines, and I will be with the NPA. Fortunately, Hilde and Philip are staying three months. For sure, they will find it strange not to see me for the first few weeks of their stay. Rita will just have to explain.

March 23. Nora keeps me company in the bus from Bacolod to the guerrilla front in southwest Negros. An innocent-looking girl, supposedly my pen pal. Lean has gone ahead with Apol and Andrea. A separate trip had to be arranged for me, a nuisance because I am noticeably white.

My heart begins to beat faster as soon as a heavily armed man sits next to me. The barrel of his M-16 pokes in my nose. But Nora shows no nervousness. She even has the guts to ask the soldier where we have to get off. She may as well have asked where the "NPA stop" is. For as soon as we alight and crawl into a waiting jeepney, the passengers are openly discussing about the kasama. Nora asks our co-passengers off-hand how the situation 'over there' is. The jeepney stops at a broken bridge over a river. The other side is NPA country.

Nora and I wade through the river. The first houses we see are nothing more than hastily built huts. Evacuees live here, says Nora, internal refugees who have been driven away from their houses by the military. Three years ago the government army stationed here took serious blows from the NPA. As reprisal the military mortared the entire zone for days and burnt down two villages.



This really looks like a liberated area. Unarmed and carefree, we pass in clear daylight dozens of houses. Nora says that the maximum program of revolutionary land reform is already being implemented here: expropriation of the big landlords' lands and distribution of the land to the poor peasants. Indeed, about a week ago, a photo of Frank Fernandez, an ex-priest who leads the NDF in Negros, appeared on the front page of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, showing him giving out land titles to 400 peasants. The ceremony, witnessed by 2,000 people and a few journalists, took place in a public schoolhouse in southwest Negros, almost under the nose of the military.

Nora and I walk for some hours through a softly glowing landscape with hardly any plant growth. Then we reach a small wooded area. "Here we are," says Ka Nora. In the middle of the forest, above a rocky hill, is where the medical camp of the NPA has been built. It looks like a village. No bamboo or palm leaves, but real constructions made out of wooden planks and with real thatched roofs.

It is nice to see comrades Lean, Andrea and Apol again. After our experience in Bicol I already feel a bit part of their group.

Lean explains why this camp is so beautiful. "It is the intention that these structures remain standing after the medical training as a field hospital. The national leadership expects that the guerrilla struggle will become more intensive, so the number of wounded in our ranks will also increase. To prepare for this eventuality, surgical teams must be trained for every fighting unit, and well-equipped field hospitals must be set up in every guerrilla front. Negros is one of the pilot areas for this new approach."

During the meal of rice with fried eggplant I make the students' acquaintance. A big group, all 32 of them, from the four guerrilla fronts of the island. After eating, Ka Apol shows me my sleeping area. There are no spread-out huts here but a big sleeping area with simple wooden beds. It is actually the patients' room of the hospital, empty for the moment. I choose to sleep in my hammock, instead of on the hard planks. Because we are neither in the mountain nor in the forest the nights hardly become cold. Wonderful!

March 25. The theoretical lesson is not yet finished. Teaching here is more complicated than in Bicol. The students do not sufficiently understand Tagalog since the local language is Ilonggo. But Lean and Andrea do not speak it. Somebody from the local medical staff has to translate.



## Variations on a revolution

The NPA in Negros is poorer than in Bicol, despite the fact that the revolution here seems to be in a more advanced stage. The difficult financial situation results in a smaller budget for meals: only seven pesos per person per day, meaning to say that we get only rice and vegetables that are in season. Personally I am not sorry: no tuyo! In Bicol the NPA receive a daily supply of from five to ten cigarettes per day. In Negros the guerrillas smoke cigarettes that are made from locally grown and cut tobacco, thinly rolled in newspapers. I ask in jest which brand of cigarette is better: the Philippine Daily Inquirer or the Daily Globe.

There are also discrepancies on the level of culture. There are no Western music cassettes here, no gin. There is more guitar-playing and singing here than in Bicol. This time I am prepared. I have replaced Het Lentelied with the Moorsoldaten and the Sandinista national anthem, the chords of which Ka Rudy easily finds on the guitar.

That the Philippine revolution differs from region to region is the result of the objective conditions. The CPP, the NPA and the NDF have a national leadership and nationally binding documents and policies. But given that the country is archipelagic, fast communication between the islands is not always possible. The heavy repression under Marcos made things more difficult. Local revolutionary leaders were left on their own for months or years on end, and were forced to take a lot of initiatives. Therefore, the regional organs of the party and the people's army can independently determine how national policies are to be applied in accordance with the specific possibilities and difficulties of the region.

## The NPA's birthday

March 28. Tomorrow is the 20th anniversary of the NPA, and that will be celebrated with a two-day political-cultural program with the kasama and the masa. Our course is at a standstill. The medics have their hands full practicing songs and a theater piece about their medical work with the guerrillas.

We go as a group to the wide meadow where the event will take place. Today is the general rehearsal for the actual anniversary celebration. There are stands with refreshments, a hotly contested basketball game between male teams of the NPA and the masa, and a more relaxed mixed volleyball match. The day is closed by a splendid presentation of ARMAS, an underground cultural group that came all the way from Bacolod. Especially the song *Magbabago* sinks in: "It will change, everything will change." They sing, filled with revolutionary fervor.



March 29. Early in the morning we are again gathered on the festival ground. The loudspeakers blare out music. Behind the podium is a giant mural that illustrates the different aspects of the people's war. Banners are everywhere: "Dismantle the repressive apparatus of the U.S.-Aquino regime!", "Fight for genuine land reform!". And more cryptic: "Bring the people's war to the last substage of the strategic defensive!" A few NPA fighters are still busy setting up the flagpoles.

At around 11 o'clock the people begin to arrive. Vendors walk back and forth with popsicles, fruits, peanuts and cookies. Families with small children mingle with dozens of armed guerrillas. Really a carnival atmosphere.

The celebration begins with the singing of the Internationale and the raising of the flags of the member organizations of the NDF. Then follows the trooping of the Main Regional Guerrilla Unit. The military parade is impressive. With the current regularization of the guerrilla army, the NPA members receive a simple set of uniforms now: every platoon has a differently colored T-shirt with long sleeves and black trousers. The hundreds of spectators enjoy a special number of the troops, the fancy drill: a series of commands and complicated movements with the arms, which must be neatly and perfectly executed. Not my cup of tea, these fancy tricks.

Ka Daday of the medical staff informs me that this company has made great sacrifices in the battlefield during the last years. "No less than 87 members have been killed, but they have already been replaced with new recruits. These sacrifices have not been for naught. This NPA unit has confiscated more than 100 automatic weapons and three mortars." In fact, one of these mortars is now proudly shown on parade. Such heavy weapons and bigger fighting units like this company, according to Daday, are necessary to hasten the advance of the armed struggle.

I find it rather painful that Daday equates the number of lost people with the number of weapons acquired. But she answers that it is therefore the task of the medical staff to train enough medics in the NPA so that the loss of lives can be limited.

Leaders of the NPA and CPP take turns on the podium to deliver speeches. But the attention of the audience goes especially to the cultural numbers. The medical staff also presents its own theatrical piece. An old peasant belts out a *komposo*, a narrative song based on a popular folk melody. In a number of stanzas he sings of the usefulness of the different study courses of the revolutionary movement: the basic mass course, the course for activists, the basic party course, and so on.



The most appreciated is the performance by the cultural group of the NPA, which was able to join a week-long workshop with the cultural workers of ARMAS. They enact the social history of Negros by means of theater, dance and songs. The group requests the public to come around the big canvas that serves as the stage. The peasants are obviously unfamiliar with this alternative and participative form of cultural performance. They remain in their places. But the boys and girls of ARMAS find a solution: they drag the canvas forward into the midst of the audience. Bringing culture to the people!

It is still as a mouse when the martyrs of the revolution are honored. A simple peasant, father of a recently killed NPA fighter, witnesses: "Death will not weaken us, but in fact will strengthen us, since every martyr is one more reason to go on." The NPA company gives a gun salute, and the parents of the martyrs receive from the NPA leadership a certificate of honor.

I notice the strong unity between the NPA fighters and the people during the whole celebration. That is not surprising. The kasama are literally the sons and daughters of the peasants from the surrounding villages. For many this celebration is the only occasion during the year for them to see their family. After another rendition of the Internationale, it is time to pack up. Left and right I witness tearful farewell scenes. Then everyone goes on his way again.

### **Barefoot surgeons**

April 1. Returning to the normal life in the camp gives me a hangover. We have rested for the past two days and we are now preparing for the surgery practicum at a leisurely pace. I have difficulty with long hours of idleness. Has this impatience something to do with my Western stress culture? There is also the language barrier, and now that my friends Lean and Andrea have already left for Manila to prepare for the next training, I have nowhere to turn to for a good conversation. I get a strong dose of homesickness. Fortunately, there is my small Sony world receiver. Twice a day I spend thirty minutes listening to the BBC World Service.

April 4. Cured of my bad mood, the course resumes. It helps when I am the one giving a lecture. I make myself useful, the time goes by more quickly and I feel good if I can make my students laugh. For orthopedic practicum, the medics can put casts on each other. They really enjoy this! Just for the fun of it, some decide to keep their arms in plaster cast for a couple of days.

April 8. It is time to be serious, considering that the first barefoot surgeons—that is to be taken literally—will come into action. Patient Dog 1 is laid on the table. We work in the operation room uninterrupted from 8:30 am to 7:30 p.m. My anesthetist Helen, barely 19 years old, is doing an excellent job.



She performs the spinal anesthesia as well as the endotracheal intubation (putting a respirator tube in the throat) perfectly.

April 10. How long I will stay with the NPA in Negros has not been exactly agreed upon. I can help for the whole duration of the training, but, since my sister and brother-in-law are in the Philippines for a visit, I prefer to go back earlier to Manila. I talk this over with Daday, the one responsible in the camp. She makes it rather difficult. At the moment it is not feasible to bring me outside.

During the course two medics take turns giving medical attention to the surrounding population. They go regularly on 'hut visits'. Yesterday evening, Ka Apol and Ka Joan visited a two-year-old baby who was almost dehydrated by amoebic dysentery. Other patients come to the camp for consultation. Often for small complaints, or just to look at the work of the NPA medics and the doctors from Manila--and from "America"! But we have also handled serious cases: a baby with a lung infection and a woman with serious lack of blood that necessitated a blood transfusion.

April 12. The course is interrupted by an emergency. A peasant enters the camp with a stuck hernia that is already gangrenous. The operating room is immediately prepared. The surgeons-in-training, Ka Ian and Ka Ever, with the expert help of Ka Apol, complete the operation. The peasant is saved.

Without the presence of the NPA this man could have had no chance to avail of proper medical care, and he could have probably lost his life. Thanks to the revolution, quality health care has been brought for the first time within the reach of these people. That in itself is important. And this medical care is provided by their own sons and daughters. That is even more important; in this manner, the poor peasants learn to trust their own strength.

But at the same time, I realize the limitations of guerrilla medical practice. Had we held this training in another zone, then we could not have helped this patient. For a fundamental, permanent solution to the problems of sickness, hunger, poverty and injustice, a lot more is needed. A society where social services are a priority, where the option for the poor is a reality, where exploitation is forever banished. It is little incidents like this that make me realize the necessity of radically excising the "three isms".

April 15. Daday has managed to arrange for my departure. As early as 5 o'clock in the morning, the kitchen personnel have already prepared for me two precious hardboiled eggs for the trip. Somebody from the local militia will accompany me. It seems that all the armed NPAs in or around the camp are



busy. Johnny is a young man who does not speak a word of Tagalog. With an old carbine slung over his shoulder, he quietly treks the bare mountains by my side.

We make a big detour around the military detachment of Candoni. A difficult day, a long march of more than 35 kilometers under the scorching sun. During the last few kilometers I keep on stumbling. In pitch darkness we go up and down through fallow sugarcane fields. We reach our sleeping quarters at around midnight: a little house on the outskirts of a big village that serves as an entry point for the kasama. Exhausted, I fall asleep.

The following morning I take a bus to Bacolod and the plane to Manila. Hilde and Philip, my sister and brother-in-law, are well, Rita says. They will be coming home tomorrow from a visit to a health project in Isabela province. Two days after that, they will leave again for an integration visit to...Negros!

### **Rooming-in**

There is little to see from Rita's belly at five months, but the baby is already moving around a lot. Rita and I want to let a natural process like pregnancy and delivery take its course as normally as possible. But because of Rita's pelvic handicap we do not dare to have our first child delivered at home.

Unwillingly we come into contact with the commercialized Filipino hospital system. Did you say natural childbirth? We find it difficult to find a gynecologist who would not immediately inject the mother with so many drugs or give her a dextrose. Even more difficult is finding a hospital that allows rooming-in, where the mother can immediately be with the newly born baby in the room.

Rooming-in is only available for a private room, which costs 600 to 800 pesos a day. They have a strange idea of rooming-in in this hospital. A few hours after the birth of the baby he will be released from the hospital and he can then be with us in the room. But given that the baby is no longer a registered patient, we will have to shoulder the costs of his care ourselves. "You will understand that there is a separate price to be paid for the baby's lying-in." Come on!

### **The attack on Candoni**

April 19. I understand now why there was no NPA to be found to bring me out of the guerrilla zone of southwest Negros, and why we had to take a long detour to avoid the military detachment of Candoni. The newspapers are filled with reports about the daring NPA attack on the military camp of Candoni! Six soldiers were killed, and also the wife of a soldier. A sorry consequence of the



fact that in the majority of army camps in the Philippines, the families of soldiers also live there.

The government army threatens to launch strong counter-attacks. A massive military operation has been set in motion a long time ago. It carries the ominous name Operation Plan (Oplan) Thunderbolt. I think of my comrades in the medical camp. Would they have noticed anything about the NPA action? Did they not have to retreat from the advancing military? It's good that the NPA now has trained medics who can take care of wounded NPA fighters.

April 26. Lean visits me at home and puts my mind at rest. Ka Apol has arrived from Negros without a bruise. As surgeon he was asked to assist the medical team of the guerrilla unit that would launch the attack on Candoni. It turned out to be unnecessary; there were no wounded. But when the four-year-old daughter of the dead woman was orphaned and was traumatized by the firefight, she was brought back by the NPA medics to the camp to be taken care of. Shahani Grace, as she was called, was later turned over by the NPA to Bishop Fortich.

### **Labor Day**

We watch the news on TV before Labor Day at Roger's house. The footages show pictures of the miners' strike in Limburg, Belgium! The gloves are off. When class struggle is at its peak, the repression of the Belgian police can be as merciless as that of the Philippine police. But the mineworkers do not just sit and watch things happen. The news reports 19 wounded policemen.

May 1. The Kilusang Mayo Uno organizes a mass action, together with some other democratic trade unions. I go to take a look. Liwasang (Plaza) Bonifacio is swarming with people and it's swelteringly hot. Fortunately there are pushcarts that sell ice-cold fruit juice. After gulping down two glasses one after the other, I notice how the thing is made. Using a rusty axe, a boy hacks a big block of ice in pieces on the dirty street pavement. The ice is then rinsed in a bucket of water, the same water used to rinse the used glasses. Then the ice is put in a big plastic can. Water, a large spoonful of sugar, coloring and flavoring are then added and stirred.

KMU Chair Crispin Beltran goes up to the microphone. He receives more applause from the public and the press than all the other speakers together. Then a march follows. Now that I clandestinely go to guerrilla zones every now and then, I find it safer to keep myself inconspicuous at protest actions of the legal people's movement. I do not want to be arrested or photographed in the frontlines of a march. When the police start dispersing the march with teargas, I



immediately walk away to safety. I turn into one of the side streets and jump into the first jeepney that comes along.

## **Oplan Thunderbolt**

In early June Philip and Hilde join a fact-finding mission to the south of Negros, organized by the health and human rights organizations. The aim is to document the effects of Oplan Thunderbolt on the people and to provide medical help where necessary.

Hilde and Philip write in our newsletter:

"We first heard about it on April 24, as guests of Fr. Vic somewhere in Central Negros: 8,000 peasants in South Negros had to leave their villages and seek refuge in evacuation centers during a military action against the NPA. This was two days after the army began to massively bombard Candoni and the outlying villages in retaliation for a guerrilla attack on a military detachment. The general evacuation was carried out in great confusion, with the people not getting the chance to take along their possessions or food provisions.

"The local government was totally unprepared to provide shelter for the refugees. A number of school buildings were hastily converted into evacuation centers. In rooms of 6 by 9 meters, 50 to 60 people live, together with chickens, pigs and sometimes even carabaos. Aside from the problem of overcrowding there was soon a shortage of food, potable water and medical and sanitary services.

"After two weeks a measles epidemic broke out. Dozens of children died of complications such as lung infections and diarrhea. Around June 1 the press reported more than 99 deaths, especially among children. The number of refugees has risen to 35,000.

"From June 7 to 10 we took part in a medical mission to those areas. The responsible officials of the Ministry of Health appeared particularly surprised over our intention to extend medical assistance to the refugees. We were told: "The government doctors have the situation under control. All refugees have, for that matter, already returned to their homes."

"But the local doctor in Candoni received us with open arms. He had to deal with a big shortage of medicine and personnel. In Candoni alone, he had confirmed 84 deaths. The health workers estimated the number of deaths in the affected area to be more than 200. The health center was totally overcrowded. Twenty-five children were housed in two small rooms. Almost all of them were



suffering from severe malnutrition, measles, lung infection and even typhoid fever.

"The mood among the refugees was one of resignation. A few thousands could not yet return to their homes, many have lost one or two children, harvests were stolen, houses were razed to the ground, and carabaos were slaughtered by the military. Because of the forced evacuation, many peasants lost the chance to sow or to plant, so there will still be no harvest next year. And the terror of the Greenans, a fanatic civilian paramilitary group with green headbands, now stalks the villages."

**Ka Ever, Ka Helen, Ka Ronald, Ka Jane...**

Later I heard from Lean the fate of our comrades in Negros. The medical camp had to be abandoned. Goodbye, field hospital! A number of newly trained medics could mix with the refugees and help check the spread of the measles epidemic. But the majority remained in the guerrilla zone, where they put their newly acquired medical knowledge in the service of the people. Because they fulfill their task with so much skill and dedication, the medics of South Negros are now addressed as "doctors" by the people.

The 35,000 refugees constituted a national and even international indictment against the Philippine regime. But the seemingly indestructible liberated zone has now become a no-man's land. Indeed the government army has not caught the fish (the NPA), but succeeded in draining a great part of its lake (the people). The maneuvering space of the NPA was reduced to a few remote forests, with malaria-carrying mosquitoes and other insects as its only mass base.

Oplan Thunderbolt also took an unusually heavy toll on the medics. Ka Ever was killed when his medical team encountered a government military patrol. He was not able to escape on time because his slippers were caught in the mud. Ka Helen, my young promising anesthetist, was hit by a stray enemy bullet during a tactical retreat and died from her wounds. Ka Ronald jumped right into a rain of enemy bullets during an NPA attack. Of the medicines that he was carrying, nothing was left except for scattered remnants that had pierced his body together with the bullets.

But the saddest story was that of Ka Jane. After more than a year of exemplary work with the NPA she went on leave to visit her parents. She excitedly headed for her village, singing along the way, not knowing that the military had occupied her village. An informer, a spy, tipped her off to the military. Military men raped her horribly. Crying for her mother she was slaughtered like a dog.



## Doubts

It find it rather difficult to accept the death of our four medics. Young people, whom I have known only recently, whom I have helped train, with whom I laughed and sang-- now dead, murdered, martyrs of the revolution. It is of course normal that guerrillas die in the armed struggle. But so many, in so short a period, and the fact that they were health workers tasked to save the lives of other kasama?

Of course it is the Philippine regime and its government army that should be held primarily responsible for this. Nevertheless I still ask Lean whether it was correct for the NPA to make an offensive while an important medical training was taking place nearby. And could not the enemy's strong retaliation be anticipated? And did not one ill-considered guerrilla action compromise the organization and education work of many years?

Lean was at a loss for words. "On the one hand, military actions form part of the liberation struggle. Violence and counter-violence, dead and wounded are unavoidable in the course of the revolution. On the other hand, this is a people's war, whereby the military component must follow certain principles."

Lean went on with her explanations. "In every guerrilla operation the people must always be consulted and be involved. All possible consequences must be well anticipated and weighed. Both the people's organizations and the NPA must be strong enough to withstand the counter-attacks. And there must be a balance between military actions against the enemy and political work with the masses."

It is not clear to Lean and myself if these conditions were fulfilled in the attack on Candoni. Lean promised to relay my questions to the leadership of the people's army.

## Tien An Men

June. The suppression of the student protest on the Square of Heavenly Peace in Beijing is widely reported in the Philippine press. The Tien An Men massacre is indeed a first-class propaganda material against the communist movement.

We are stunned by the developments in China. I feel that something had to be done. Initially the Chinese student movement started with just demands, but took a more pro-American standpoint and rejected socialism as time went on. It was also clear that for weeks the Chinese government showed patience with the



demonstrators. Imagine Belgian students taking over the Grote Markt<sup>5</sup> and the Wetstraat<sup>6</sup> before the international press: how long would the police hold back? But then again, was there really no other solution except for this violent intervention of the Chinese army?

During the days and weeks after the Tien An Men massacre, facts were made known which brought a different perspective to the whole affair. The '7,000 dead' that stood prominently on the front pages of the newspapers were clearly products of propaganda, with a lie-factor of 1 to 10. And among the casualties were also Chinese soldiers, killed by rebelling students.

The Philippine national-democratic movement seems to have taken a blow because of Tien An Men. KMU Chair Beltran issued a statement congratulating the Chinese authorities for their courageous and correct response. That is pouring oil onto fire. After receiving criticisms from various corners, including foreign solidarity groups, the KMU statement is withdrawn in favor of a much more nuanced one.

At the end of June Lean brings us a statement of the CPP on Tien An Men. The Philippine Communist Party expresses its regrets and sorrow over the tragic events of June 4. The CPP declares that this concerns an internal matter of the Chinese Communist Party, but advises it to carry out a thorough investigation about the causes of social unrest in China. Is this not a result of the introduction of capitalist methods and bourgeois ideas and of the intimate relations with the United States? At the same time, the CPP condemns the gross disinformation campaign of the West about Tien An Men and confirms its trust in Chinese socialism, in the Chinese Communist Party and in Marxism-Leninism.

## Yuri

June 19. Rita writes to her sister Hilde:

"How are things going on around here? BUSY! Seven months pregnant and still busy giving two study courses. One about mother and childcare, given by the women's organization GABRIELA, in cooperation with the Council. I am the teacher in this course, together with an American midwife, but at the same time I am the interpreter (English-Tagalog) and live model. Each participant learns from my stomach how to determine the position of the baby. The second course is about calamity prevention, which will be held in Bacolod, Negros. I will pretend to be one month less pregnant, because from seven months onwards

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<sup>5</sup>Brussels' central plaza

<sup>6</sup>where the Belgian government buildings are located



one is no longer allowed to take the plane. I hope I succeed in getting the necessary papers and certifications."

That succeeds, and so do the last weeks of the pregnancy. All Filipinos predict that it will be a boy, but Rita stubbornly hangs on to speak of a "she".

Exactly on the night of the expected day of labor, August 11, Rita's bag of water breaks. But it is not yet real labor and we decide to sleep one more night before going to the hospital.

August 12. The labor pains continue. At the hospital Rita's pelvis is being examined to find out whether the birth passage is wide enough for the head of the baby. Rita explains to the radiologist that she has had a fracture of the pelvic entrance during a car accident. We don't want to tell about the incident in El Salvador where Rita stayed with the guerrillas. The link between the Salvadoran and the Filipino guerrillas would have been immediately made by intelligence services. We become uneasy when the radiologist asks what those pieces of metal are doing in Rita's pelvis. "It would have been better if I said that I am a victim of the Nivelles gang<sup>7</sup>," Rita whispers to me.

A few moments later the delivery commences and our first child is born without much ado: a boy. I cannot suppress my joy after being allowed to hold him. Rita and I decide to call our little boy Yuri.

An hour-long squabble with the personnel and administration follows. We want to have him in our room as quickly as possible. You have to make a damn fight here for your rooming-in! Anyway, one advantage of Filipino hospitals is that a family member is allowed to stay overnight in the room. Because there is only one blanket and the centrally controlled air-conditioning is set to a very cold level, all three of us huddle cozily together in the big hospital bed.

After almost two years in the Philippines, the birth of Yuri is a good occasion to make a telephone call back home. This was, after all, also a special occasion for the grandparents. The Vanobberghens receive the news with joy, because Rita was able to give birth despite what she has gone through, but at the same time with concern over Rita's capacity to cope with it. And the unspoken grief over their inability not to experience it at closer range. For the De Belders Yuri is the first grandchild. But hearing each other on the telephone after two years is so strange that my parents and I fail to even find the things to say to fill the three minutes. Writing letters goes a lot better. Every other week we faithfully keep an exchange of letters with both sets of grandparents.

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<sup>7</sup>criminal gang that committed 28 bloody murders in Belgium in the mid-80s



August 14. We are already at home with the baby. We put Yuri in the straw duyan (hangmat) and rock him to sleep. A group from the Council comes for a visit on the first day. They are glowingly enthusiastic about the blond baby with blue eyes. "Just like contact lenses," is the admiring expression. (It is fashionable for dark-eyed Filipino movie stars to wear blue or grey contact lenses.)

Godmother and godfather are called ninang and ninong here. A child can easily have about five of each, a good social security. We give Yuri a Belgian godfather and godmother, three ninongs and four ninangs.

We have the impression that we are seen as complete by the Filipinos only now that we have a child. It is here the most natural thing in the world that after nine months of marriage (give or take a few months), couples get a baby. Thanks to Yuri, we also get more social contact. Neighbors come to converse, children from the neighborhood come to play with him. It can be annoying at times when complete strangers talk to us on the street or in the stores, or even pinch Yuri's white legs to see if they are for real.

Some of the things we do with our newborn is looked at with suspicion by the Filipinos or commented on with a headshake. So Yuri does not wear gloves unlike Filipino babies, he is sometimes completely naked, or nicely on his stomach: all taboos in Philippine culture. Is it maybe because of this that the little fellow cries so much and sleeps so little?

### **Brownout**

We have a new phenomenon in Manila since a couple of months: the brownouts, the euphemism for blackouts or electrical outages. Once or twice a day the electricity goes dead because of the overloading of the badly maintained network, for a period of from one to four hours every time. Only then do you notice how dependent you are on electricity: the iron cannot be used, the washing machine stops right in the middle, the fans no longer give a soft breeze, and your unsaved files disappear in one instant from your computer.

Early October. For the first time Rita brings Yuri to the healthy baby clinic. She writes in her diary:

"It was quite something. I arrived with Yuri at 9 o'clock. There were lots of people. I was not yet totally inside and I already had to step on the weighing scale. 'But I am here for the baby,' I protested. To no avail. So on to the weighing scale, first with Yuri and then without him. Subtract both weights from each other and voilà: 'Your baby weighs 6,400, Mrs.' They don't even have an accurate baby-weighing scale. We got a number and the baby's temperature was



taken. The weight and temperature were written in ballpen on the hands of the mother. After a long period of waiting and talking with the other mothers I received a vaccination card, with also the weight and the temperature written on it. Afterwards Yuri got his first injection."

## **Bicol Anew**

October 1989. For the first time NPA medics from all over the country are gathered for a national medical conference, in a guerrilla front in Bicol. Lean invited me to come as an observer. This way I can get to know about the medical work of the NPA in the other areas.

Because of organizational problems the conference is postponed three times. It is no small thing to organize such a big activity under guerrilla conditions. But I do not find the uncertainty about my departure amusing. Patience may be a virtue but it has not been given to me. I'm leaving with mixed feelings this time: the first time away from Rita and Yuri. Rita is also less than enthusiastic. Will she be able to take care of everything in the house with Yuri? And what if something happens? In the end she still urges me to go, so as not to let this chance slip by.

The postponement also has its advantages. The closer it is to November 1--an important holiday for Filipinos--the easier it is for me to take a leave. And unexpectedly I can meet visitors from the NCOS<sup>8</sup> who have brought letters and packages for us. They have also brought along a BRT-TV team with them, who come to shoot promotional spots for the 11.11.11 campaign. Rita is filmed while giving a training on diarrhea and dehydration to a group of mothers in a slum area near Smokey Mountain. I am briefly interviewed.

October 24. Oh, I can leave. Gina, a rather elderly woman, accompanies me. This time we go by train. An old train that traverses the 400-km to Northern Bicol at an average of 40 km per hour. It is already dark when we get off in a tiny station in the middle of the fields. We quickly enter a little house, get acquainted with a few NPAs who will accompany us to the guerrilla camp, and lie down to rest.

October 25. Along the way, we run into a group of armed men. Into the bushes straight away! The kasama cock their weapons. Nervously shouting back and forth, and then a sigh of relief. It is an NPA patrol team, under the leadership of Ka Nilo, the husband of Ka Nelia with the broken bone. It is a

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<sup>8</sup>National Center for Development Cooperation, umbrella organization of Belgian NGO's that together organize the annual 11.11.11 fund-raising campaign



heartwarming reunion. Ka Nilo tells that his wife is better and is again learning to walk. A success story of guerrilla medicine!

In the camp we meet Ka Bong again, the leading medic of the NPA here. He tells me the latest news. The enemy raided a medical team of the NPA. They were holding consultations in a barrio, eight of them, including Bong's wife Ka Maricel. While they were pulling the teeth of a woman, she saw through the window the approaching soldiers. With her mouth open she could only make signs and shout "aaa...aaa" to warn the kasama. Ka Toto could only grasp his weapon, Ka Maricel her backpack and like thunder they jumped out the kitchen window into the bushes three meters below.

Only Ka Joan did not manage to escape. She was caught. Also 50,000 pesos worth of medical materials fell into the hands of the military. Apparently Ka Joan gave in during the interrogation - or was she already a spy who tipped the enemy that a medical team would go to the barrio? The fact is that Ka Joan appeared twice before the local press under military supervision. There she said that she was present at an NPA medical training given by four doctors from Manila and a foreigner. I wonder how long it would be before I get myself into trouble with my visits to the guerrillas.

Bong also tells me that a new NPA company has been formed in Bicol, in line with the call of the NPA high command to regularize the guerrilla army. But maintaining a regular army costs a lot of money, since more troops are a heavy burden for the local population. So the medical staff has to do with a smaller budget. The medics try to solve this by asking for a fixed financial contribution from their patients per consultation. But at the first barrio clinic where payments were asked, only six patients showed up. With free health service the medics had always had a full waiting room.

The camp is under the leadership of Ka Son, a veteran of the revolution in Bicol. I recognize him from a photo in the papers: it is the legendary Commander Nognog who is painted by the military and the media as the devil incarnate, probably because the government army has been frustrated many times by Ka Son and his guerrilla troops. Known to have a heart problem, he was supposed to have been seen once in the Makati Medical Center, the most prestigious private hospital in Manila. With a great show of force the military closed all the entrances of the hospital and combed the entire building. With no results. Hence, the image of the invincible Commander Nognog became even larger.

As Ka Son sits before me--a well-built man with mischievous eyes, tousled curly hair, beard and roaring laughter--he does not immediately strike me as the prototype of the feared guerrilla commander. Ka Son is cherished by his people.



He is close to them. Every 5 o'clock in the morning he leads the physical exercises, and he joins all the exercises himself. Ka Son is the husband of Ka Rina-with-the-beautiful-voice, Lean tells me. They have four daughters.

### **Liberating health care a la NPA**

The conference is held to make a summing-up of the health work of the NPA. Members of the medical staff of the NPA from some ten regions are present. There are days of extensive exchanges of experiences, holding of workshops, writing of documents. All very interesting. It gives me an insight into the history, the principles and the present reality of the liberating health care in the Philippine guerrilla zones.

The World Health Organization asserts that health is more than the absence of disease: it is a state of total physical, mental and social wellbeing. The community based health programs that the Council advocates goes a step further. Through the story of Remedios, the social, economic and political causes of disease and unhealthiness are addressed. Thus the insight grows that health is also a question of fighting injustice.

In the NPA conference this argumentation is extended further. In a situation of structural inequality that is deeply rooted in the Philippines because of the dominance of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism, the struggle for health must be a struggle for liberation from the "three isms". A struggle for which the people are conscientized, organized and mobilized and for which the people are armed. Against the structural violence (exploitation) and the direct violence (repression) of the existing system, liberation can only be achieved by means of armed struggle. After the triumph of the revolution and in a new society, efforts can then be undertaken for a permanent improvement of the health of the Filipino people and for their physical, mental and social wellbeing .

But to do something concrete about the miserable health situation of the poor Filipinos, of course one should not wait for the triumph of the revolution. For the NPA, "wholeheartedly serving the people" is no empty slogan. This is brought into practice every day, by taking care of the health of the people, among others.

The rich experiences of the representatives to the conference paint a beautiful picture of guerrilla medicine. Ever since the early days of the armed struggle the NPA has extended medical care to the population in the countryside. The successful use of acupuncture and herbal medicine contributed to the rapidly growing popularity of the people's army.



However, the medical knowledge of the first NPA medics was not always scientifically based. Many medics believed that in acupuncture one had to use as many needles as possible. "Sometimes the patient looked like a pin cushion," chuckles Ka Joa, one of the pioneers in Bicol. There was also the negative influence of the use of Western medicines. Many medics thought it was necessary to prescribe a medicine for every complaint.

In the early years the correct techniques of first aid were not sufficiently known. Somebody from Southern Mindanao relates the tragic anecdote of an NPA fighter who was wounded in a firefight. A medic was there with an unopened ampoule of Hemostan in his hand, and cried, pleaded, wept desperately: "Don't die, don't die." The medic had never learned how to give an injection. Let alone did he know that Hemostan is a completely ineffective medicine that is heavily marketed by the pharmaceutical industry. And neither did he know that putting pressure on the bleeding area or the artery is the only and effective way of stopping the bleeding.

Sometimes the problem was simply the lack of materials and medicines. A medic tells that his only "weapon" was a thermometer. Fortunately, these "children's diseases" of guerrilla medical practice have for the most part been cured.

Apart from the curative medical work, the medics also undertake preventive measures and health education. They assist the people in building latrines, give courses on personal and environmental hygiene, teach the women maternal and childcare. In well-organized barrios, cooperative pharmacies are set up in cooperation with the peasant organization or even with midwives working for the government's health station.

The medics also assume organizational tasks. They stimulate the people to put up a barrio health committee. Such a committee forms part of the alternative revolutionary government in a barrio. It consists of volunteers who carry out health activities after their day's work. They maintain the herbal garden, take care of convalescent patients or run a village pharmacy.

To my pleasant surprise the NPA has its own code of ethics. Just as doctors have their Oath of Hippocrates and nurses the Pledge of Nightingale, the Filipino guerrillas have their Revolutionary Code of Medical Ethics. On the basis of the principle "Serve the people", the code provides guidelines for the correct attitude of the medic towards his patient, his fellow medics, and towards patients from the enemy side. A wounded enemy soldier who has surrendered or who is no longer able to fight back is treated by the NPA medics just like any other patient. His wounds are treated and he receives the necessary medicines.



There are known cases of wounded military who are given some money for the bus ride back to their detachment.

That is a stark contrast with the government army, which does not hesitate to barge fully-armed into hospitals to arrest wounded suspects. Doctors are also required by them to break their professional code by reporting all cases of gunshot wounds to military authorities. And finally, during battle the medical station of the NPA is immediately fired upon with mortars as soon as they discover it.

November 2. The conference is finished. It is concluded with a cultural night. I have made a Tagalog version of the Moorsoldaten. I am asked to come forward for an ethnic seduction dance with a female medic from the Cordillera. There is laughter all around. Ka Son, who is emceeing the program, sees to it that every team in the camp contributes a number and gets a warm applause, up to the kitchen and supply staffs.

I still have to stay a few days in the camp until I can safely go outside. Lean, Andrea and Apol have gone ahead. I asked them to give a letter to Rita:

"Dear Gloria and Miguelito (the guerrilla name that Lean has thought of for Yuri),

"I have had little time to think about you. Our activity is over and has been very exciting--and also tiring. Can you imagine: workdays of ten hours, and for us often an extra two hours for meetings and preparations. The people here are OK, the food is excellent, and there was not much rain. Yesterday we had a cultural night: heartwarming, inspired and inspiring. How I wish you could come along, not so much to be together (although that is not a bad idea), but especially because you could actively and concretely contribute to this project. You would experience first-hand the warmth and the satisfaction. But of course you know all that. If everything goes well I will be home in a couple of days. Let's celebrate! Miguel"

## **Kudeta**

December 2, 1989. It seems like there is a non-stop direct reporting of the Tour de France, and with Filipinos in the leading role, what with every household tuned in to the radio. Listening to the radio is from time to time interrupted by running to the streets. Not to see colorful cyclists pass by but to admire a free air show, peppered with a serving of early New Year's fireworks.

It is a coup d'etat attempt gripping the entire country. The Manileños follow with full attention how Tora-Tora planes of World War II vintage bombard



government troops. Just as in real air shows many spectators are armed with binoculars or cameras. Others are on the roofs or church towers. Children applaud every time Sikorsky helicopters fly low. Thousands gather around the fighting troops on the ground. This live show is more exciting than a similar TV series. That a few rash spectators pay with their lives for this game doesn't seem to matter much.

The coup attempt is the work of RAM, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, rightist military men led by Gringo Honasan. He is already on his fifth coup attempt against President Aquino. The RAM stood on the side of General Ramos and Defense Minister Enrile in 1986 when the two refused to follow Marcos' order to shoot. But now RAM wants to set up an open military dictatorship in order to hit harder against the guerrillas.

But the big boss, the United States is satisfied with Aquino. She refuses to change the pattern of land ownership, dutifully pays the huge foreign debt, strongly suppresses the trade unions and the people's organizations, and carries out a ruthless war against the NPA. Washington uses the threat of the RAM to bind the Aquino regime tighter to itself. The US takes care of making the saving gesture by sending out its Phantom Jets. They shoot down a rebel Tora-Tora and chase away the others. Without airpower, the coup threat collapses into a heap.

December 6. The coup d'etat drags on somewhat, with a spectacular occupation of Manila's financial center. War can sometimes have an unexpected democratic effect, in the sense that it is not always the poor who are the most affected. The rebel military hole up for three days and nights in the chic hotels and luxury penthouses of Makati. Thousands of snobbish tourists, businessmen and other rich people hide like rats in their holes. But the rebels know that they are like birds for the cat, and they surrender. Manila heaves a sigh of relief. The Christmas season can begin.

### **Eastern Europe**

End December 1989. The East European regimes are falling like dominos. How should we interpret this? I write to my sister-in-law Hilde:

"I find it difficult to explain and analyze these events adequately and to formulate a balanced Left standpoint. In any case it's good that we have always been critical of the East European regimes and have not been in league with Gorbachov. Meanwhile, I think it would not do any harm to put more attention and energy in solidarity with the liberation struggles in the Third World, which the events in Eastern Europe do not render less timely or necessary. Hopefully, the revolutionary movements in the Third World do not become indirect victims



of the mistakes committed in Eastern Europe or of the anticommunist witch hunt that is now engulfing the West."







## Chapter Four

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**"Haven't you met any bushmen?"**

**1990**

### **Northern Luzon**

February 24, 1990. With Ka Apol, I am in a medical camp of the NPA in Northern Luzon to conduct a course in surgery and dentistry. There are just the two of us. Andrea and Lean are going to give a training in Mindanao, and the medical staff of Northern Luzon has not yet arrived. The aim of the medical camp in Negros has already been achieved in Northern Luzon: the setting up of a well-secured, semi-permanent field hospital for wounded guerrilla fighters. The only thing that can still be improved is the furnishing of the operating room. Wood abounds here, and the capable Apol has set himself to carpentry.

The holding of the training is being hindered by some stupid logistical problems. Fifteen boxes containing the course textbooks and medicines were delivered by the courier to the wrong address and were nowhere to be found for several days. I try to kill time by doing my usual activities leisurely. I take a full bath every day, twice soaping and twice rinsing myself thoroughly just like a full-blooded Filipino. I look forward to the simplest activities that I plan systematically: brushing the teeth, going to the toilet, taking an afternoon nap, cutting nails. Fortunately I have brought with me a book, *Detering Democracy* by Noam Chomsky. I make it a point to read only one chapter a day, for who knows how long the wait would last.

When Ka Gerry of the camp leadership sees me reading, he winks at me to follow him. To my surprise, the field hospital has its own small medical and literary library. Aside from *The Principles of Midwifery*, I find a book by Francisco Metzi, a guerrilla doctor in El Salvador, with the appropriate title *With a Backpack Full of Health*.

February 27. My admiration for the Central American revolutions receives a serious blow when I hear from the BBC and the Voice of America that the Sandinistas have lost the election. Disbelief and dismay. I write down my doubts: "What will happen now to this model for liberation movements? We should learn much from this, as from the events in Eastern Europe and China. The Filipino revolutionaries have the advantage of being able to draw lessons while their struggle is still going on." But I have a problem: should I now delete the Sandinista people's song from my repertoire for the cultural evenings?



Rita is also shocked. "Our Daniel (Ortega) has lost! And Bush calls Violeta Chamorro a second Aquino. WHAT NOW?" she writes in her diary. US president George Bush supported the rightist winning presidential candidate Chamorro.

February 28. I find in the camp the simple, stenciled newsletter of the CPP-Northern Luzon. It gives the following figures on the guerrilla war in the region in 1989 : 386 armed encounters between the NPA and the government army, of which 212 were offensive and 174 defensive. A total of 475 military men killed and 500 weapons confiscated; 102 guerrilla fighters lost their lives.

### **Ka Hazel**

My interaction with the kasama is also hampered by the language problem: the language here is Ilocano. I succeed however in carrying out a conversation with Ka Warden, a lightly wounded kasama and our lone patient in the hospital, who knows some Tagalog. I sit beside him as he tells his story: "It has been ten years since the NPA first came to our village. Fearful, the people would close the shutters of their windows as early as 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The government had told them that the communists would cut their heads off. But today, our village is fully organized. We even have a people's militia."

Ka Hazel is the attending medic in the hospital. I ask him how he became a medic. "Three years ago, I was taken captive by the military when I took a leave to be with my family and help with the harvest. A traitor had tipped me off, and the M-16 that I kept at home was the evidence. The soldiers beat me with their fists and the butt of their rifles. They forced me to sign my 'confession' and to go on patrol with them.

"When we came to the neighborhood of a guerrilla zone during a night patrol, I ran and succeeded in escaping. I hid in the forest for days. I continued to trek at night until I reached the masa. They took care of me and gave me food. They brought me again into contact with the kasama.

"The military were furious over my escape. In retaliation, they took my wife as prisoner, but because of pressure by a human rights organization, she was freed. I still have pain in the back, deafness and nightmares because of the military's torture." Ka Hazel is getting relaxation therapy from another medic for this.

"But you have not yet told me why you became a medic," I remind him. "Oh yes, that was because the military accused me of being an NPA medic. That was the best motivation for me to become one!"



March 2. There is a lot of guitar-playing and singing in this guerrilla camp. The favorite song is *Walis tingting*. A *walis tingting* is a strong broom, made from the ribs of coconut leaves. The song is a call to everyone who hesitates to side with the revolution. It goes as follows: "One stick can easily be broken, but many sticks together make a strong broom that sweeps very well. Come, join, the unity of the people leads to victory."

There is also studying in the camp, although not about medicine at the moment. The command has ordered that the grasp of military and political knowledge must be refreshed. During the roll call in the morning -- the first time that I experience a morning roll call in a guerrilla camp -- we undergo a sort of examination. Among the things that have to be known is the *tres-ocho*, three-eight. These are the Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention that Mao Zedong formulated as guide for the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and which have been adopted by the Philippine New People's Army.

The Three Main Rules of Discipline are as follows:

1. Obey orders in all your actions.
2. Don't take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.
3. Turn in everything captured.

And the Eight Points of Attention:

1. Speak politely.
2. Pay fairly for what you buy.
3. Return everything you borrow.
4. Pay for anything you damage.
5. Don't hit or swear at people
6. Don't damage crops.
7. Don't take liberties with women.
8. Don't ill-treat captives.

## Life and death

March 5. The monotony of camp life is broken. Three young *kasama* have arrived last night. During breakfast, two of them call Ka Apol and me. Their companion, Ka Dayang, is five months pregnant and has intense stomach cramps.

A threatened abortion? Apol and I hurry to the mountain top where the huts are. We examine Ka Dayang. It turns out that she is nine months pregnant and already in labor. How to explain this? Carefully asking her gives us the solution



to the puzzle. The girl has been married for only five months and kept her protruding belly hidden by binding it with a scarf. In the Philippine liberation movement, premarital sex is a serious violation of discipline.

Apol and I decide to keep this discovery to ourselves and we rush to prepare everything for the delivery. Labor has already started. The few instruments that are available in the camp are of no use. There is no time to sterilize them. Still, without any problem Ka Dayang gives birth to a little son.

A few hours after the delivery, I look how mother and son are doing. For one reason or the other, Dayang is convinced that she does not have any milk. The resourceful kasama already have a can of powdered milk ready. I have difficulty hiding my disappointment and give Dayang and the onlookers an instant course on the advantages of breastfeeding and the disadvantages of bottle-feeding.

Today, life and death go hand in hand. While I was with Ka Dayang, a heart-rending cry came from below. Someone brings the news that the husband of Ka Nila, one of the medics present, has been killed. He was the commander of the NPA battalion in Northern Luzon. He was surprised by the enemy in a clandestine drop house in the city. Many weep with Ka Nila. A dejected atmosphere prevails throughout the day. Photos are taken out, stories about other martyrs are retold. I tell the story of Michael De Witte, and about the medics of Negros.

March 6. Once again I take a look at the baby, and I find him snugly suckling on his mother's breast. That same afternoon we improvise a course on pregnancy and childbirth. Thus we are able to immediately connect theoretical knowledge to this practical example. Using colored chalks, Ka Apol draws the female anatomy on the blackboard. He even presents a piece of drama. His widely opened arms are the ovarian tubes, his fingers the fibers which hups catches an egg that has been released from the ovary. Apol plays the soldier when the sperm cells start to attack. And he makes a happy face to represent the fetus, which drifts carefree in the amniotic fluid. "Carefree," Apol explains, "because he is still unaware of the 'three-isms'".

March 8. Some of the lost boxes have arrived, but still no course texts. I borrow a pair of novels from the camp mini-library. Reading in a tropical forest on a hammock is of course a nice activity, but I ask myself what use it is for the revolution.

I also cannot wait long for the training, since after two and a half years in the Philippines, Rita and I have planned a vacation for a couple of months in Belgium. I have to be in Manila to arrange all the papers for our trip. The camp



leadership decides that a kasama would bring me outside tomorrow evening, so that I could take the bus to Manila the next day.

## **Generic medicines**

After two years of working for the Council, meanwhile re-christened as the Council for Health and Development (CHD), Rita and I find working with a non-governmental organization rather frustrating.

Although you may be doing useful work, the reach of the projects is not impressive. Are they just drops in the ocean? Another frustration is that the NGOs are not taken seriously by the government. The government sometimes ask the NGOs' advice or support for its policies. But even when the NGOs and the government join hands, the results remain trifling.

One example is the Law on Generic Medicines. According to this new law, doctors can only use the generic names of medicines, meaning just the name of the active ingredient of the medicine and not the commercial or brand names. The patient can then buy the medicines he needs in its generic form, or in brand name. The pharmacist is supposed to help him choose the cheaper product.

This law has undergone a long ordeal. The pharmaceutical industry, which saw it as a threat to its profits, launched smear campaigns in the media against generic medicines. The Philippine Medical Association took legal action against "this infringement on the physician's freedom to choose". Even US senators lobbied with the Philippine government, upon the request of US multinational corporations.

BUKAS, an alliance of NGOs from the health sector, including the Council, cooperated in bringing the law into being. The reasoning was that this was going to lead to cheaper medicine and their correct use, to the advantage of the patient and to the disadvantage of the pharmaceutical industry.

But after more than a year's experience with the Law on Generic Medicines, it turns out that it has been for nothing. Doctors just don't apply the law when issuing prescriptions and neither do pharmacists upon delivery. Or they keep to the letter of the law while they trample on its spirit. But above all it is difficult to fight the multinational corporations that control more than 90% of the Philippine medicine production and distribution.

The multinationals make the patient pay dearly. A prescription of antibiotics costs around 200 pesos; for a worker that is three days' wages. And the prices of medicine rise twice as fast as the consumer price index. Sure-fire profits for the pharmaceutical industry. This ensures that business flourishes. At the



pharmacies medicines are recommended with advertising slogans: "This month antibiotic X and painkiller Y at a discount!" For February with Valentine's Day: "The month of the heart: all heart medication at giveaway prices!" You can also buy gift certificates at the pharmacies. Wish someone a happy birthday and an illness with a certificate for 500 pesos worth of medicines!

A lot of advertisement for medicine is also made on radio and TV -- and you find a simple transistor radio in the farthest corner of the Philippine countryside. These advertising spots are often neatly packaged. For example in a radio soap opera presented by a certain Superlady. Every day Superlady describes a couple of diseases, down to the most unpleasant detail. And for every disease, she recommends a product.

### **On a European tour**

April-May-June 1990. Other Third World volunteers vacationing in Belgium, direct from the African bush or from the Bolivian altiplano, complain about the commotion and the noise back home. Rita and I, direct from Manila with its millions of inhabitants, enjoy the rest and the quiet. Two and a half years is a long time, and the reunion with family and friends is a pleasure.

We stay with Rita's sister Hilde, to whom naturally we have much to tell. We do not have much time for a vacation. Hilde has prepared a busy program: information evenings, meetings, interviews, articles. And visits to various NGOs, in search of funding for the health projects of the Council.

But for me the main chunk is taken by UG solidarity work, directly for the Philippine underground movement. Hilde has also become a member of the Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB) and maintains contact with the international office of the NDF, which is based in Utrecht.

Jose Maria Sison and Louie Jalandoni, the NDF's international representative, are enormously interested in my experiences with the guerrillas, about which they seldom get first-hand news. Before a number of NDF members, I show my slides and tell my story about Southern Luzon, Bicol, Negros and Northern Luzon. The NDF people suggest that we do this as well for the other solidarity groups in other European countries. Together with disseminating information, I can also try to collect funds and medicines for the health work of the New People's Army.

The following weeks I travel incognito, under the name of Peter, through France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. I find myself with the Autonomous in Hamburg and the Greens in Bonn, with progressive Swedish Christians and with Danish and Norwegian communists.



Sometimes, I feel it going beyond me. A Norwegian comrade asks me from A to Z about the military strategy of the NPA. With a French NGO, I am immediately confronted with the infamous Tien An Men statement of the KMU. And in Germany, an autonomous girl pulls me into the middle of the fields, where no one can hear us. She asks me whether I can provide safe accomodation for an underground member of the Red Army Fraction in a Philippine guerrilla front!

## Earthquake

July 6. Back in Manila and it's adjustment time all over again: the crowdedness, the pollution, the heat, the garbage on the streets which obviously has been there for quite some time. Before leaving for Belgium, we had asked our friends in the Council to look for a maid, a yaya, for Yuri. This is how children here with parents working outside the home are taken care of. But it is more difficult nowadays to find yayas. Young girls from the province would rather go abroad as dancers, receptionists or maids to earn hard dollars. So we look for another solution. A small alternative school two streets away has a nursery for children one year and above. Little Yuri will have to get used to Tagalog and English, whereas the boy can hardly understand a little Dutch!

July 16. While registering Yuri at the school, I suddenly feel the ground shake under my feet. When I see the walls of the school building move, I don't know what is happening. Then I realize: an earthquake! The shocks last for a number of seconds. Everyone runs outside.

July 20. It was a strong earthquake, measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale, with the epicenter in Northern Luzon. It is the biggest disaster in the Philippines since the Second World War. 1,650 dead have already been buried, 1,000 bodies are still concealed by the ruins. Thousands of families were rendered homeless in an instant. The material damage reached up to at least 15 billion peso: buildings flattened, roads split open, 300,000 hectares of agricultural land rendered useless because of floods, mudflows, landslides and devastated irrigation systems.

The politicians are out there like a flash to see what profit can be made out of the situation. By helicopter they make publicity visits to the affected areas, making sure that photographers are on board. Local politicians throw in their two cents' worth - rather, they put their two cents into their pockets -- by stealing relief goods or selling them. In the best case, they limit themselves to making propaganda for the elections. Donated food is repacked in sacks with signs in big letters Gift of mayor X or With the compliments of governor Y. The US also joins in: they send one million ready-to-eat meals, surpluses from their military stocks.



The real rescue work, however, is hopelessly at a snail's pace, inefficient and uncoordinated. Relief goods lie for months in warehouses in Manila.

### **Bayanihan**

July 30. With ordinary Filipinos, it is very different. In difficult moments like this there is a lot of solidarity. In the countryside there is the centuries-old practice which is called *bayanihan* or community labor to help others. Clothes, food and medicines are gathered. Hundreds of volunteers go around daily to remote barrios, where government help has not yet arrived. Independent radio stations send out a steady stream of information and appeals.

The high point of these selfless efforts is undoubtedly the rescue of three people who were pinned down for almost 14 days by the ruins of the Hyatt Terraces Hotel. They were able to survive on rain water. The rescue was not done by special foreign teams with sophisticated materials but by Filipino mine workers who continued working when the foreign rescuers had already given up. The union of the mineworkers is a member of the KMU. The latter sent five disaster brigades to the scene, accompanied by medical teams and members of the committees for safety and health of various enterprises.

The NGOs are active, too. Sixteen NGOs from the health sector organize a "Common Rescue Operation" or Samahang Operasyon Sagip - S.O.S., with headquarters in our Council for Health and Development.

August 8. A flurry of activities in the office. Collection of financial help, sorting out of medicines, typing of press releases, gathering volunteers, renting jeeps, sending out medical teams and many more. Until the end of August, all normally planned activities give way to Operation Rescue.

August 10. I join a medical mission to the province of Pampanga. As an NGO for basic health care, disaster assistance is actually not our task. Emergency medical assistance may sometimes be necessary, but does not improve the lamentable health situation of the poor Filipinos. In order to have a more lasting impact, a part of every mission is devoted to giving health information and education: how to prepare an oral rehydration solution to prevent dehydration from diarrhea, how to make cough syrup from medicinal herbs, how to supply your body with the needed vitamins without using expensive vitamin supplements. We see this medical mission as an occasion to begin the work of setting up a village health program. That is why we prefer that a local organization of peasants, women or youth is responsible for the organization of the medical mission.



In one of the barrios we see a stark example of the other approach to humanitarian help, the paternalistic one. While we hold consultations in the village square, we witness what is going on at the highway. A couple of luxury jeeps arrive, filled with sportily dressed gentlemen and fashionable ladies in shorts and sandals. It is the Rotary Club of one of Manila's elite districts.

They ostentatiously distribute sacks of food to the people, taking care not to put a foot inside the dirty, muddy barrio itself. This magnanimity is completely documented on video, later to be enjoyed lazily in the sofa. I also want to record this moving scene on film, but when I am finished treating my patient, the Rotary has already left the barrio. It is Sunday, and further on is certainly a beautiful stretch of beach, perfect for a barbecue.

To complete the caricature: upon closer inspection it turns out that every sack contained Kellogg's Honey Pops! The simple peasants in Pampanga have certainly never seen Honey Pops before, and they will never eat that for breakfast.

### **Rainy Season**

August 30. It rains tremendously today. On the way to the office, the traffic slows down to a halt. Arriving in the Council, we notice our officemates leaving. "There is a typhoon. The weather bureau has declared signal No. 2 over Manila. Make sure that you are home before Manila is completely under water." Said and done! Rita and I first take the LRT for part of the way. The LRT is the aboveground city train that is not hampered by floods. Then a jeepney. But after a few hundred meters, the traffic halts to a standstill. It is still a few kilometers to the house, but we decide to cover the rest of the distance on foot, in the torrential rain. The streets are flooded. Sometimes the water rises up to the knee. The roles are turned around: trucks, otherwise the kings of the road, stand idle on the sides, and the whole street belongs to the pedestrians, who help each other: wherever there are dangerous holes on the road, there is somebody to warn you.

September 3. It is tense here these days. After a series of unexplained bombings, everyone is talking of a fresh attempt at a coup d'etat. About the who, why and by whom, different versions circulate. The RAM is supposed to plan a reenactment of its coup attempt of last December. Defense Minister Ramos could be doing a "legal" coup d'etat: using his position to get more power for himself. Or so that martial law can be declared, Cory Aquino remaining as a straw figure.

Many Manilans begin to stock up. The shelves in the supermarkets are half-empty. Progressive NGO workers, such as the people in the Council may be



targets for arrest during a coup d'état. Security measures are taken. A couple of staff members stay permanently in the office, the rest stay at home temporarily, waiting.

September 6. Nothing happens. Have the coup plans been rained out?

### **Gulf crisis**

Also in the Philippines, we get to know that Saddam Hussein has invaded Kuwait and that the United States is threatening with a military intervention. The Gulf Crisis causes the Filipinos sleepless nights. Many of their countrymen or relatives are working in the region as migrant workers.

Everyday, more than 1,000 skilled and unskilled labor force depart from Manila to try their luck elsewhere. Around 700,000 Filipinos officially work in 'Saudi'; 40,000 to 80,000 of them in Iraq and Kuwait alone. Filipinos who work as nurses in the US, as a maid in Hongkong or as a worker in Saudi Arabia, yearly send three billion dollar to their families. For the Philippine economy, people are the most important export product, the biggest source of foreign exchange.

What does migrant labor mean concretely? In a slum area, a concrete house shines between the dilapidated hovels. The owner has been working five years in Iraq. Every month he remits a part of his salary, which is used to pay for the house. And if he is on vacation, he brings with him all sorts of electric appliances. Nina, living two houses away, is less fortunate. Her husband also left for Saudi, but is now living with another woman and has stopped sending a single cent. Teth, a colleague in the Council, is very worried. Her sister works as a nurse in Saudi Arabia. She would like to come home, but could not take any leave because of the critical situation.

The Philippine government does not go out of its way to repatriate the Filipinos. It does not want to see the precious source of foreign exchange dry up. Returning migrant workers would only add to the army of the unemployed.

September 24. Also in Manila can we feel the brunt of the West's economic embargo against Iraq. The Philippines is suffering from a shortage of oil. People are starting to stock up on gasoline and cooking gas, and Philippine Airlines cancels a number of domestic flights. With the Gulf crisis, the government has raised in one go the price of all oil products by 25%. A concession to the oil companies Shell, Caltex and Petron who control the entire market. The three work as a cartel. They determine the price and therefore also their profits, and divide among themselves the huge government subsidies.



The centuries-old garbage problem of Manila continues to give the government headaches. The governor of Manila has been given 30 days by President Aquino to clean up the mess. The poor man doesn't stand a chance. Nonetheless, a good initiative was made in our street. Instead of sacks and boxes of garbage spread out here and there on the street, a concrete box was built where all household garbage must be deposited. But no one came to pick it up except for cats and food scavengers who expertly search all the garbage on the street for everything that is edible and recyclable. The box spilled over and the garbage began to stink. So the people returned to their habit of throwing their garbage into the rivers and the sewage system.

## **Samar**

I told Lean that I would like to go to a guerrilla area once more. And this time, not for a medical training, but just to experience ordinary guerrilla life. Ella brings me Lean's answer.

She suggests a trip to Samar. Bingo! So I find myself in Samar, the island where Rita and I were originally supposed to go. As one of the poorest regions of the Philippines, Samar has been one of the bulwarks of the Philippine revolution since the early '80s. The entire interior of the island, with an area one-third of Belgium, is quasi-liberated area. Samar is also legendary because the NPA has a battalion there of almost 500 men. And a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) is also being experimented in Samar.

September 28. I fly to Tacloban City. I am met at the airport by a kasama, who brings me to a hotel.

September 29. My companion and I get off from the bus on the side of the highway. We eat in a nearby house and as soon as night falls we start walking together with two armed kasama. After a three hour hike in the dark, we reach a small guerrilla camp where the leadership of the revolutionary government is based. The camp consists of no more than six huts and a bigger conference room. Because we are not far from the ocean, there is plenty of fresh fish. After eating, I stretch out in my hammock. I'm happy: again among kasama!

## **Our Urgent Tasks**

September 30. Ka Edu, a calm, handsome man of around forty, is a member of the regional CPP leadership. He explains in detail the different steps of organizing work among the people. These are in essence unchanged since the publication in 1976 of *Our Urgent Tasks*. This is the distillation of the experiences of the first eight years of the armed struggle.



The first step in the clandestine organizational process is making contact with several trusted individuals, for example family members, in a barrio to be organized. This takes place often at night, done by a semi-legal team or an armed propaganda unit. During the first meetings, only revolvers are brought along, which are concealed so as not to frighten the peasants. A *Barrio Liaison Group* (BLG) is set up with the contact persons. As their first task, they have to make a social-political profile of the barrio. This is the initial social investigation and class analysis.

The second step is the formation of organizational groups (OG), which consist of from 10 to 15 people from the strata of poor to middle peasants. There can be different OGs for peasants, women and youth. These groups begin with the preparations for the anti-feudal struggle: confronting the landlords with the demand of a minimum land reform. Meanwhile the armed character of the revolution has become clear for the OGs, but kasama with rifles do not yet show themselves in the barrio.

Once the OGs grow and increase in number, their best elements form an organizing committee (OC). This is the third step. This committee oversees the different tasks of the revolutionary movement in the barrio: finances, education, organizational work, health care and self-defense. The leaders of the OG's and OC's are appointed by the party on the basis of their class origin, political consciousness and capabilities.

As soon as the OC is strong enough and at least three-fourths of the peasants in the barrios have been organized, the fourth step is taken: the setting up of the underground peasant association. The association chooses its leaders and now the anti-feudal struggle can proceed with a chance of success.

Meanwhile, a local party branch is set up from among the most politically advanced villagers, which takes over the supervising role for the armed propaganda unit.

The fifth step is the election of the Barrio Revolutionary Committee (BRC) by a general people's conference. The BRC is the 'organ of political power', the organized counter-power of the people, the alternative government at the barrio level. Subcommittees take charge of different administrative functions. The BRC proclaims laws and decrees and supervises their implementation. It carries out socio-economic projects, leads the educational and organizational work among the people and directs the people's militia.

A few BRCs can be combined into a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) on a municipal or district level. To provide a firm basis for the PRG, it is necessary that the minimum program of agrarian revolution is



carried out, that there is a strong party section, and that an NPA unit operates in the area.

### **The Provisional Revolutionary Government**

October 2. On a blackboard of the meeting room, Ka Timmy makes organizational work more concrete with a long explanation on the PRG in Samar. Ka Timmy was requested by the NDF to study at close hand this pilot project. You can see that he is a city cadre, an intellectual, and no hardened guerrilla or a peasant son. He wears the same jacket day and night and I have not seen him take a bath today or yesterday. But I like Timmy. He speaks with a soft voice, and gives me precise explanations from his neatly written notes.

The PRG area stretches over a length of 70 kms and a width of 40 kms. The area consists of 2 districts comprising 8 municipalities, with a population of more than 10,000 people. The PRG can be seen as a set of concentric circles. The core is the guerrilla base, which covers 40 barrios of 5 municipalities. Here the organizational level is highest: there is a Barrio Revolutionary Committee (the fifth step). Peasant associations are active in the 49 barrios of the next concentric circle (the fourth step). In both areas, party sections have already been set up. One hundred eight barrios located outside have organizing committees or organizing groups (steps 2 and 3), while 55 barrios are virgin terrain.

The PRG is well equipped with guerrilla units. Not only is the district guerrilla unit present here, the front guerrilla unit is also based in this area. And there are also local people's militia.

Most of the local authorities (the so-called *barangay councils*) have been neutralized -- that means that they accept revolutionary authority and do not resist. In many instances, the structures are just taken over by the revolutionary organizations. It has happened that the *barangay captain*, who ordinarily possesses natural leadership capabilities, also becomes the leader of the Barrio Revolutionary Committee.

In strengthening the guerrilla base, various elements are important. The military aspect is only one of them. At least of equal importance is the organizing strength of the masa. The New People's Army must have a wide maneuvering area, and at times of enemy attacks the NPA units can fall back on other guerrilla fronts and other units for support. Timmy explains this easily: "If the NPA attacks on three fronts, it cannot be caught with two hands by the enemy."



A PRG functions as an alternative revolutionary government. It declares revolutionary laws and decrees. It gives the maximum chances for organizing work among the people. It sees to it that people's militia are trained to give support to the NPA during offensives. The PRG is a concrete reflection of how the future new society can be built upon the victory of the revolution.

Ka Timmy also gives an overview of the socioeconomic projects being implemented in the guerrilla zones. These range from poultry farms to fishpens, from production and consumer cooperatives to literacy programs, nurseries and people's health. The aim of this work is threefold. First, to meet the direct needs of the people. Second, financial resources can be gained from some economic projects, so that the revolution can reach a higher level of self-reliance and finally, socioeconomic projects are important in winning over the population for the revolution and to be assured of their continued support.

### **To the villages with Ka Timmy**

October 3. With a couple of kasama, Ka Timmy and I go on a trip for a few days to villages and hamlets in the interior. Samar is without doubt the poorest place I have seen in the Philippines. The people are deprived of the most elementary government services. The island has only a coastal road. The many barrios in the interior are not considered important enough for roads to be built. The traffic is carried out on the many waterways which cut up the island, with small unmotorized prows. Or on foot. The rivers are crossed by means of a simple bamboo bridge, with an improvised raft of banana stems or by wading through the stream. In the rainy season, many villages are cut off for months from the outside world.

There are few plantations (with underpaid day workers) or big haciendas (with exploited tenants) in Samar. The poverty is based on a more elementary level: the majority of Samareños are subsistence farmers. Every few years, they burn down a piece of forest for personal use, on which they then plant a few simple crops (slash and burn farming). The few who are connected with the money economy strip abaca fiber from the stem of the plant which looks very similar to the banana plant and from which strong rope is made. Or they cut rattan stalks in the forest, of which the elegant Filipino furniture is made which is now much in fashion in Europe. These are bought by middlemen at ridiculously low prices.

The Filipinos' staple food, rice, is not readily available in the interior of Samar. There is just no money to buy milled, ready to cook rice. If there is rice, it is upland rice, a half-wild variety that is cultivated without irrigation in the mountains, giving only one crop a year.



A portion of rice is pounded for every meal. The raw rice is placed in the carved-out center of a piece of wood and pounded with a long, thick pestle. This time-consuming and tiring task is sometimes done by two or three people together, women as well as men, in which the sticks rhythmically and rapidly take turns. Not easy for somebody not used to it: I try once and have to stop immediately, with everyone laughing at my spilling all the rice.

On days that there is no rice, we have to do with corn, or even with root crops. What we take with this is not much: leaves picked from the forest, sometimes a little tuyo, or in the worst case only something to give flavor: salt, chili or homemade coconut vinegar. Meat is not found here, and even an egg for the entire family is a rare treat.

I see barrios here that are so poor that there is not even a store. Once a week, the 'richest' villager makes a trip to shop in a bigger village, two full boxes, as much as he can carry. As long as his stock lasts, his house serves as the village store. But you can hardly call it a sari-sari store, where everything is sold. Tuyo, cans of sardines, Chinese spaghetti, dry cookies, salt and cheap Filipino rum are the only goods. There are even no cigarettes, since here, as among the guerrillas in Negros, the people themselves roll the dried tobacco leaves in a piece of old newspaper.

October 5. There is no electricity or water supply in the barrios we visit. Drinking water comes from a spring near the river. We go to the toilet on the stones along that river. The rain washes them clean. We also do our washing in the river, in the company of the only carabao in the village.

In the simple huts, something catches my attention. For the first time, I see houses in the countryside where no calendars are hung with giant photos of the local governor or representative. Even the politicians forget the barrios of Samar. Maybe because the people here are not in the mood to make the effort to go to the polls every few years and vote for politicians from whom they can expect nothing.

October 8. Timmy brings me along to a model project. Twenty families who have been driven away from their homes by the military, have each received a piece of land from the NPA in the guerrilla base. They also collect rattan stems in the forest. Through the cooperative, the people's organization makes sure that the rattan sold in the village gets a reasonable price. The PRG has supported this project financially for six months, earning them the support of 20 peasant families in the area.



### Getting into trouble

October 11. The kasama have convinced a barangay captain to bring me safely outside. What they have not told me is that we have to rent a *banca*, a boat, to go to the mouth of the river. I do not have the 500 pesos needed to pay the boatman. So we just go on foot to Las Navas, a bigger village where we can take the ferryboat in the early morning.

What they didn't tell me either is that there is a military detachment in Las Navas. Although we enter a house on the edge of the village in the dark and via a backdoor, my presence is immediately noticed. Hardly have I changed from my muddy pants and shoes to shorts and slippers when I hear knocking on the door. The barangay captain calls me downstairs. Sergeant so-and-so is outside, and wants to know what the foreigner is doing here.

I'm so frightened I almost fall from the stairs. Through the half-open door, I see not only the sergeant, but also two well-armed men leaning carelessly on the wall. I stammer that I am on a research mission for an NGO, looking for worthwhile socio-economic projects to fund. The military mutters something and disappears.

I realize that my explanation doesn't sound very credible. But because I'll be taking the ferry the next morning at 3:30 a.m., I feel rather at ease. Just to be sure, I throw my most sensitive notes in the toilet hole.

Again knocking, no, pounding, at 10 p.m. Again the sergeant with his companions. Without much ado they push open the door and step inside. In an unfriendly tone, the sergeant begins to interrogate me. "Papers!" I do not have anything except a photocopy of my passport. It is a semi-diplomatic passport, in which is stated in four languages "In the name of the King of the Belgians, We, Minister for Foreign Relations, request all Magistrates or Officers, be they Military or Civilian, whoever they may be, of the Foreign Sovereigns and States, to allow the free passage of De Belder, Bert".

The King of the Belgians only moderately impresses our sergeant. He notes down the number of my passport and visa. His companions meanwhile search my backpack inside out. Fortunately I had ensured before leaving the guerrilla zone that it is clean: no hammock, no revolutionary reading materials.

"Where is your 45?" the sergeant snarls. He means of course a Colt.45, popular among the NPAs for self-defense. But I pretend to be stupid: "45? What 45?" "You are under house arrest. You are not allowed to leave tomorrow with the ferry. You are expected in the headquarters of the 61st Infantry Brigade. I will pick you up at 10 o'clock." In panic, I rack my brains how I can escape from



here. I hesitate, but then finally I feel through my wallet and present the sergeant with 50 dollars. He doesn't take it, only looks somewhat more doubtful about my intentions. Stupid, the man cannot do anything with dollars in Samar.

I am frightened like hell. House arrest! Interrogation in a military camp! I imagine myself in a dirty jail for months, and then a dishonorable deportation from the Philippines. Like that Swede and that German who came out of the guerrilla zone in Southern Tagalog two years ago. I get diarrhea again. Which is convenient to help dissolve the rest of my notes in the toilet bowl. I lie awake the entire night, with thumping heart.

### **Interrogation with the colonel**

October 12. At breakfast, I find it difficult to swallow anything. The barangay captain is also nervous. He will be happy when he can bid me goodbye and return to his barrio. It is after ten when the sergeant arrives. He is a bit friendlier, and I try to allay my nervousness by talking to him. We first take a boat, but next we miss the jeepney. That means eight kilometers more walking to reach the brigade headquarters.

Tired out, the sergeant and I walk into the military camp. I look around and notice a number of brick buildings and barracks, sports and training fields, surrounded by a high wooden wall. They are expecting me. A colonel receives me in a friendly manner and offers me lunch. For dessert a thorough questioning. I hide vaguely behind "connections with the Belgian embassy" and feel rather safe now that I have really nothing incriminating with me. The colonel asks a little about my NGO work. I mention my sending organization Bevrijde Wereld only under its little known English name, New World. The only address that I give is that of my parents in Belgium. I keep silent about the Council, and I do not give any name or address in the Philippines.

For a moment I become anxious when the colonel asks in detail about my travel route. I practically do not know the names of the villages we had passed. But the colonel keeps on prying: "But then you had to take the boat to arrive early in Y?" "Indeed." "And from Y, did you then take the jeepney to Z?" "Yes, yes, that was with the jeepney." "And then you still walked six hours?" "Exactly six hours." And then suddenly. "Did you not meet bushmen along the way?" He meant of course the NPAs. "Bushmen?" Again I try to look innocent. The colonel appears satisfied and disappears.

Meanwhile I let my eyes wander around. In fact, the families of the soldiers live within the camp walls -- a violation of the Geneva Conventions. On a blackboard in the hall, I see detailed staff maps and rows and columns of



statistics. My good comrades of the NPA are coldly called CTs by the military, communist terrorists.

The colonel turns up once more. Everything is in order as long as I pass by the military information service, which has an office near the airport of Catarman. Two soldiers will bring me there on their motorcycle.

The two soldiers are in civies, thus unrecognized as military men, and we drive for one hour and a half along abandoned roads. Again I am struck with fear. What if the soldiers drive me into the forest, kill me silently and dump my body somewhere? No one will know a thing. Nobody in the outside world knows that I am in this part of Samar at this time. My dead body would not be found for weeks. My fantasy runs away with these hallucinatory thoughts. I already see my funeral before my eyes. Back to reality, I observe that we are approaching a city: Catarman. I breathe a sigh of relief.

The men of the intelligence service look like movie characters. In civilians, with light colored polo shorts, a thick mustache and the obligatory sunglasses. Again a detailed interrogation. My papers are once more examined and copied. I am photographed from all sides, like a criminal. They go through my baggage anew. I fear for a moment that they might pull the much-used trick of planting a weapon in my baggage to accuse me of illegal possession of firearms. But they do their job correctly.

Upon seeing my empty notebook, they beckon to me. "What is this? You are on an research mission and you do not write anything in your notebook for weeks?" Indeed not very logical. But I feel that nothing else can happen to me and I screw up my courage: "I write using invisible ink, with *calamansi*. Got that from Agatha Christie." The man gives a surley laugh but lets me go. A heavy burden is lifted from my shoulders.

I want to leave Samar as fast as possible, and enter the airport. Damn, the first flight is not until tomorrow. I hide in a nunnery in Catarman where rooms are for rent and I don't leave my room the whole day.

October 13. Safely home, with many stories to tell Rita. I inform Hilde Vanobberghen in Belgium by fax about what happened to me. Together we decide that no great damage has been done and it is best that there is no need to raise the alarm.



## Rita's diary

September 28. "You had just stepped out of the door when Manny arrived, with the news that two workers, organizers of the KMU, had been shot by the police. They lie in state in the church across the street."

September 30. "Our little boy is sick, but he's taking it well. Hopefully, it will all be over before you are back. He is teething, that's why he is somewhat difficult. Add to that he has a heavy cold. But the worst part is his diarrhea. Last night three times, with blood and phlegm. That made me suspect amoebiasis, so today we went to the laboratory with a sample of his stool. And yes, it was amoebiasis. Where could he have gotten that? Both at home and in school, drinking water is boiled. Ah well, just use antibiotics."

October 5. "Since you left, we have been busy, busy, busy at the Council. Processing to get medicines from Belgium, and the field microscopes from England. A lot of work with project proposals and reports. If all these succeed, our health projects here can continue."

October 9. "Today we're expecting you."

October 10. "One more day of waiting. That's not too bad so long as everything there goes well. It only makes the reunion more exciting. Let's hope for tomorrow. Everybody is beginning to ask where you are..."

October 12. "Strange, but the longer you stay away, the more the feeling arises that your return becomes improbable. Although statistically seen the possibility becomes bigger every day. I have to think of the fact that you always worry whenever I am a few hours late in coming home. The roles should now be reversed, with you here waiting for days..."

## Welgang bayan

October 30. We've just had a turbulent four-day general strike or *welgang bayan* against the oil price hike and for a salary raise of 38 pesos per day. It was a highly charged day. At the high point of the strike, different buses were set on fire. Four people were killed in the process. The military accuse the city partisans of the ABB. But the legal trade unions are also targeted. Medardo Roda, chairperson of the transport union of KMU is arrested. And today beats it all: during a talk show on TV, KMU chairperson Crispin Beltran is arrested by his co-guest in the talk show, Colonel Diokno! The regime is talking again of banning the KMU.



**Pregnant again**

November 13. Rita is pregnant again. All our Filipino friends are convinced that it will be a girl. "Because you look beaming," they say to Rita. They add that Yuri will now become a *kuya*. The *kuya* is the oldest son in the family, a big responsibility.

After our unsatisfactory hospital experience, Rita and I agree to give birth at home. This has many advantages, certainly in a third world country. You need not go out looking for the rare hospital where the hygienic situation is adequate and where the baby is allowed to be with you in the room very soon. You are not shaved without any reason, given an episiotomy or cut open. It is a lot cheaper (a hospital delivery here costs easily 10,000 peso, a caesarian section as much as 50,000 peso). Your suitcase does not have to be ready; you don't have to suffer the fright of not reaching the delivery room on time because of the eternal traffic stoppages; and you don't have to look for accommodation for the other children.

But after writing this to our parents, a misunderstanding occurs. They think that by "home delivery" we mean going to Belgium. It takes a while before we understand how they came to that conclusion. "Home" for us is no longer Belgium, but Manila, our apartment, our Filipino friends.



## Chapter Five

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### The Year that Mount Pinatubo Erupted

#### Via the United States...

My sister Hilde and brother-in-law Philip have been working in Nicaragua for a year. They were sent there by *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* (*Medical Aid for the Third World*) to help develop the Sandinistas' medical services in a small city. It had been our dream to have a look at that country. Rita, of course, will be glad to relive the memories of El Salvador and the many Salvadoran compañeros that she could meet again in Managua. Aside from Hilde and Philip, old classmates, friends and acquaintances of ours also work there. Lastly, we are also curious to experience what Sandinism has meant, and its similarities with the Philippine revolution.

We ponder our decision. It's now or never: with only one child, and Rita four months pregnant, such a trip is still possible and affordable. The idea that we can escape from the Christmas rush in Manila is an additional reason.

As a bonus, we include Chicago in our itinerary. We can spend Christmas there with the family where Rita had lived for a year, 15 years ago, as an exchange student of the American Field Service (AFS).

December 23, 1990. We already feel at home while we are landing in Chicago: an enormous neon advertisement of McDonald's hamburger, exactly as in Manila. It is freezing. We go with Rita's Mom and Dad to buy some warm clothes. In the big warehouse, we are again confronted with the Philippines. A pair of warm hand gloves has the mark *Made in the Philippines*. It costs 21 dollars. The young female workers in a Philippine processing zone where these gloves are made exclusively for export, would not earn that for a week. These girls are just like modern slaves chained to the factory. They are required to rent a bed in stuffy sleeping barracks. In the eyes of the multinationals they need no more than one mattress, for they have to work 10 to 12 hours per day and 6 to 7 days a week.

Mom and Dad relate how the "bastion of freedom and democracy", the United States of America, is becoming a social mess itself. The problem of the homeless is increasing at an alarming rate. In a city like Chicago, their number increases by 5 to 10 percent per year; 13 percent of the American population, 31 million people, live below the poverty line.



In the *New York Times* of December 24, 1990, we read how the health situation of the poor in the inner cities has worsened in the last few years. Since 1988, the number of TB cases in the U.S. has increased by 15 percent. Also the number of cases of hepatitis A, measles, mumps and whooping cough is on the rise. These diseases are virtually non-existent in America's middle class and rich neighborhoods, and "belong" rather to a Third World country like the Philippines.

### ... to Nicaragua

December 27. A sputtering motor just before leaving detains us for one more day in the United States. We stay in a hotel in Miami, a city where hordes of rich and rightist Central Americans have found a comfortable sanctuary far away from the Cuban, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutions.

December 28. In the airplane we are in the company of dolled-up ladies wearing tinkling jewelries and of burly men in custom-made suits and cowboy hats: Nicaraguan exiles who, after the Sandinista electoral defeat, are returning to their fatherland to claim back their expropriated villas and land.

Hilde and Philip live and work in Jinotepe, where they are renting two modest rooms owned by Doña María. Rita, Yuri and I move in with them.

The following days we look for a number of friends. For Rita there's a surprise: she meets her *compañera* Nidia Díaz, commandant of the FMLN in El Salvador. For a time, Nidia had been the best known political prisoner of the Salvadoran regime. She was swapped for Ines Duarte, the Salvadoran president's daughter who was detained as a prisoner by the guerrillas. Nidia is in Managua regularly. But since the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas she has been wearing sunglasses and moves around with a bodyguard. Under Chamorro it is not unthinkable that the Salvadoran death squads would carry out operations even in Managua.

With the Salvadoran *compañeros* and some Belgian volunteers, we talk a lot about the developments in El Salvador. I write down my thoughts in a letter to Hilde Vanobberghen:

"Everyone is enthusiastic and hopeful for a favorable though negotiated solution of the Salvadoran conflict. The revolutionary movement is, I believe, very pragmatic and yet principled. But the optimism seems to me a bit illusory: the first point and most important obstacle, namely, the purging of the government's army and the paramilitaries, I don't believe will ever happen. And even if it's spelled out in black and white, would the paramilitaries not act as clandestine death squads? I also regard the noble goal of 'demilitarizing of



society', with the simultaneous dismantling of the government and guerrilla armies, idealistic and dangerous. Since when have the people no need for their own armed power to defend their gains?"

For somebody who lives in Manila, Managua is a dream city: spacious, green, tidy, quiet. It strikes us that there are few street hawkers and practically no beggars. Quite an achievement for a poor country that has just had years of economic blockade and contra-war. After 10 years of Sandinism, it appears that the income disparity is a great deal smaller than that in the Philippines.

In Managua we do not see that flood of blaring advertising of American products nor those extremely stupid American TV shows that irritate us interminably in Manila.

But at the same time, we hardly notice any traces of the Sandinista revolution in the streets. The famous black-red flags are nowhere to be found, the colorful wall paintings are now worn out. The only exceptions are the gigantic portraits of Sandino and Carlos Fonseca, the founder of the FSLN (Sandinista Front for National Liberation) on the front gable of the Palacio Nacional. Probably no more than a mere symbolic token.

The Nicaraguan people suffer under the Rightist government of Violeta Chamorro. Late December we exchange one dollar to 3 million *córdobas*. To buy something you should bring with you stacks of paper bills: 1 million for a liter of milk, 5 million for a pound of cheese. The prices rise continuously. Those who are lucky to have dollars change a small amount every time, for the next day they get more *córdobas* for their money. Taking everything into account, life is almost twice as expensive as in the Philippines.

How have the Sandinistas allowed things to go this far? I write:

"It is a sad state of affairs with the FSLN. A majority of the leadership is willing to work hand in hand with the Chamorro government, in the name of concepts such as economic recovery, national unity, peace, reconciliation, and stability. Under the leadership of Ortega, it seems that the social-democratization of the Front persists."

Our carefree vacation in Nicaragua is disturbed by the threatening Gulf War. Former president Daniel Ortega tries in vain to mediate. The indignation here is great over the imperialist lust for power of Bush & Co. against a Third World country that has dared to go against Western interests.

January 17, 1991. Doña María summons us to her living room. The American bombing of Iraq has started. On the television we are awed by the live



CGM H 300



high-technology barbarity, coupled with the enthusiastic shouts of the commentator. As if he were covering a football match. Disgusting.

### Reading materials

February 16. Just after our arrival in Manila, Ella drops by. She informs me about the state of affairs in the Medical Section of the NPA. Various planned courses are postponed due to intense militarization.

Ella brings a number of new issues of different magazines. At last, again some reading materials! First she shows me... my own articles. On Lean's request I wrote a couple of articles, after the medical conference a year ago, about the health care in the guerrilla movement. One is published in *Liberation*, the magazine of the National Democratic Front, under the pseudonym Miguel Moya. The other is in *Pulang Bandila* (Red Flag), the occasional publication of the NPA, under the pseudonym Norman Escandor.

It was not me who chose the latter name, one that definitely is too much an honor for me. The first name refers to Dr. Norman Bethune, the Canadian thoracic surgeon who in the '30s joined the Republican side of the Spanish civil war and developed a system of blood transfusion in a war situation. In the '40s Norman Bethune went to China to join Mao's famous 8th Route Army. He died there of a finger infection--antibiotics were still non-existent at that time.

The last name refers to Juan Escandor, a known Filipino cancer specialist who in the '70s left his career to join the underground resistance. In 1983, "Johnny" Escandor was dastardly assassinated by Marcos' military men.

### Gorbachov

Ella also has a copy of *Ang Bayan* (The People), the official publication of the CPP, containing a good analysis of the Gulf Crisis and the renewed aggression of U.S. imperialism under the so-called New World Order. And a long article about the Soviet Union under Gorbachov who, according to Ella, continues to whip up lots of discussions inside the movement. The author is positive about the just concluded 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Uncritically he accepts Gorbachov's theories that the "most important victory of perestroika is the winning back of freedom", that "real Soviet power has been restored", that "the benefits of a market economy have been proven in the whole world", and that the "new thinking" in foreign policy has led to peace, disarmament and international cooperation.



More comes out of Ella's handbag: the declaration of the Central Committee of the CPP on the occasion of its 22nd founding anniversary, on December 26, 1990. This looks like a point-by-point rejoinder to the *Ang Bayan* article:

"Among the best known 'results' of the perestroika are the expansion of private cooperatives at the cost of the state and collective sectors, (...) and the general collapse of the economy (...) Among the best known 'results' of glasnost is the unbridled ideological and political attacks on the basic principles of socialism, and the aggravation of capitalism, nationalism, ethnic conflicts, religions, anarchy and organized crime (...) Among the best known 'results' of the 'new thinking' are the overthrow of the revisionist regimes in Eastern Europe, (...) the withdrawal of the support to fraternal countries and parties, and the new role of the Soviet Union as a kind of junior partner of the U.S., among others, in the Gulf War."

Two views that are diametrically opposed. According to *Ang Bayan*, Gorbachov is the great renewer of socialism; according to the anniversary statement of the CPP, Gorbachov is the last grave digger of what is still left of socialism in the Soviet Union. Gorbachov's policies are the logical completion of the 35 years of revisionism in the Soviet Union, 35 years of watering down, undermining, ignoring and, finally, reversing all the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism.

It surprises me that the official party documents could publicly come out with contradictory standpoints. Ella can only sigh, saying that there is an ongoing discussion inside the national-democratic movement about the analysis, strategy and tactics. This discussion has not abated, especially in the face of the Philippine revolution's loss of terrain in the recent years. Alarming reports have been circulating, says Ella, but clarifications are yet to come. Supposedly, a thorough investigation on the causes of the problem is now being undertaken inside the CPP.

It begins to dawn on Rita and me that our optimism toward the Philippine revolution is now being overshadowed by dark clouds.

### **A katulong**

March 7. Once again we move to a different place. An apartment just across ours is vacated. Aside from the space that serves as the living room, dining room and kitchen, there are two extra bedrooms, a covered area to do the laundry and a bathroom. How are we going to fill up this place?

And that's not all. We have also found a *katulong*, a girl to help us with the household chores. We ask Mercy, that's her name, to drop by only in the



morning. She will do the laundry using our semi-automatic washing machine, iron, sweep (a daily must in dusty Manila) and bring Yuri to school. That way, Rita and I can go to the office earlier. With our second child coming, some household help is more than welcome.

March 15. We are more convinced this time to have the baby born at home. This apartment is after all bigger and offers more privacy than a one-room apartment. After a long search we finally find a midwifery service that is available 24 hours.

### **Bicol once more**

March 17. Through an underground courier system that ends with Ella, I receive a tiny folded note from Ka Bong, the head of the NPA medics in Bicol. Within the framework of the intensification of the people's war decided upon by the CPP leadership, the NPA is going to launch a summer offensive. In every operation the medical staff is to be mobilized to extend first aid, not far from the front line. Additional medical assistance, up to performing surgery, would take place in a field hospital. Would I be interested to come to support and evaluate this pilot project during an NPA tactical offensive (a guerrilla assault)?

If medical assistance is needed in armed actions of the guerrillas, I am willing to go. The Easter and summer vacation is a good time to disappear from the CHD for a couple of weeks.

March 23. I am picked up in Manila by Ka Joval, a member of the NPA-Bicol medical staff. With the bus, jeepney and tricycle we reach a small coastal village in Albay province. After a two-hour night boat trip, Ka Bong is waiting for us on the shore, waving to us with a flashlight. I am once again 'inside', with the guerrillas. Ka Bong embraces me. The fact that an internationalist not only pays a short visit to the NPA without any obligations but returns and makes a commitment – this really heartens the kasama.

The medics' camp is well hidden in a banana bush. We are but a small team: 3 patients, 2 kitchen volunteers, an NPA group of three that is assigned to security, and the medical team that is composed of 4 kasama. Half an hour from here lies the Main Regional Unit, a company strong (about 90 persons). This area has long been consolidated: the first organizational work dates back to 1976.

I meet with Bong and my tasks are defined as follows: 1) help in the general medical examination of the NPA fighters before the TO, the tactical offensive; 2) be part of the medical team during the TO itself; 3) help in the medical



operations; 4) help improve the management of the medical work. As a bonus, I can perhaps give education on the international situation.

A girl comes to ask me if she could wash my clothes and a kitchen help addresses me with "*po*", the polite form. These are new recruits who, in their short stay in the guerrilla zone, have not shaken off the feudal culture. Politely, but resolutely, I explain to them that I am also a *kasama* and do not want any privileges or polite forms.

### **Ka Toto's constipation**

March 24. Ka Toto, a member of the medical staff, is sick. "Constipation and headache, caused by long walks on an empty stomach," indicates the diagnosis. As therapy, he gets a thorough massage with perfumed disinfectant alcohol and *sambong* herb. I wonder if and how we could ever reconcile traditional and Western methods of diagnosis and treatment.

I have a long talk with Ka Necel. She hails from a village in the nearby Sorsogon province, where she could finish only her elementary schooling. Just like many girls from the Philippine countryside, Necel was sent to Manila when she was 14 years old to work as a housemaid. She did not feel at home there and returned to Bicol. When she turned 18, she joined the NPA, which for years had been active in her barrio. But a group of the paramilitary CAFGU soldiers has put up a detachment there. That is why she had not visited her family for four years now. Although she claims to be shy and that blood terrifies her, Necel's task in the NPA is to take care of patients. After two medical courses, she is now a devoted and attentive medic.

What a difference the revolution can make in the life of someone like Ka Necel! The difference between a life as a submissive and uneducated house slave, suffering extreme exploitation and perhaps abuse and rape, and a life as a self-assured NPA medic, with not only a sensible job but also an active participation in the transformation of Philippine society.

March 26. The reconciliation between the traditional and Western medicine will not occur today. Ka Toto's situation is not improving. I determine it was typhoid fever, and prescribe strong antibiotics.

With the medics, I review the most important topics of first aid, surgery and anesthesia. We practice wound suturing by stitching pieces of cloth. And of course we discuss Ka Toto's constipation.



**Ka Maricel's hysterical fits**

March 29. Today is a special day: the 22nd founding anniversary of the NPA, and at the same time also Good Friday and a full moon! What else can this mean than that the crucifixion of a people bears within it the hope for liberation. We choose to celebrate the anniversary instead of the Holy Week. We improvise with a steamed cake with raisins and a glass of hot milk.

In the evening we suddenly hear loud cries and shouts from Bong's hut. As we rush there, we find Bong's wife suffering from spastic cramps in her arms and legs. I notice right away that this is not a case of epilepsy, but rather an attack of hysteria. Bong tells me that Maricel has had this before, ever since their barrio clinic was raided by the military. I ask him to leave me alone with Maricel and I give her a sedative injection. As soon as I cover her legs and arms with a sheet, they relax.

I decide to talk with Bong. It is clear that Ka Maricel is experiencing the stress of the guerrilla life. For one, she has not seen her two children for more than a year, they are under the care of her parents. Bong sighs deeply. I realize that my sacrifices--leaving Rita and Yuri behind for a couple of weeks--means nothing compared with that of most Filipino kasama.

**Ka Waway undergoes an operation**

March.31 Everything is set for the tactical offensive, but the official order has not yet been given. The NPA leadership is waiting for the best combination of circumstances and the latest information on the enemy positions. It is to be a coordinated offensive, with other NPA units. That makes the preparations no easy matter.

Boredom begins to sink in. We are only a handful here, and most of my companions speak no Tagalog, only Bicolano. Fortunately, I have a book to read and a radio world receiver. Incidentally, I get to listen to Radio Nederland. The Dutch open their program with carillon music; no bigger contrast is possible with the jungle sounds that surround us here.

April 2. Ka Bong decides to while away the days by being as productive as possible. We will perform a pair of operations. The circumcision of the 14-year-old Ka JM is a dress rehearsal. Ka Waway, whose eye was hit by a bullet last year, must be subjected to a general anesthesia to remove the shriveled eyeball. Bong is the surgeon. I admire his orderly and careful approach. He accurately follows the procedure given in the surgery book that lies open on the operating table. The operation lasts more than three hours and is a success. Ka Bong



concludes by performing some plastic surgery to remove to some degree the ugly scars from Ka Waway's face.

The operation is followed by a thorough evaluation, from the preparation of the instruments to the post-operation care of the patient. Such an evaluation, with criticism and self-criticism, allows us to prepare ourselves for the bigger work ahead, once wounded NPA fighters will arrive.

Ka Waway, too, has an interesting story to tell about his life. He used to hang around the slum areas of Pasay in Metro Manila and was into drugs. He was arrested and maltreated by the police and languished in jail for nine months. After his release, Waway went back to the province, where he got to know the NPA through his brother's friends. In view of his past, he was not allowed to immediately join the people's army. But after a six-month probationary period in a peasant organization, he was finally accepted as an NPA member.

### **With the fighting unit**

April 6. We are called to go to the nearby camp of the main guerrilla unit to have a meeting with Ka Flavio, the leader of the regional NPA command. Upon reaching the camp, Ka Bong and I see a young, handsome kasama scrubbing a kitchen pot in the river. It is Ka Flavio himself. After giving us a warm handshake he immediately goes to the day's business.

The tactical offensive will be taking place very soon, Ka Flavio announces. The medical plan must be integrated with the general military plan. Behind a pair of shrubs a model of the target is drawn: a barrio that has no less than four enemy detachments, one is run by the army and the rest by the CAFGU.

"This complicates the NPA tactics terribly," says Ka Flavio, "for it is of primordial importance that we avoid casualties among the civilians."

The attack is to be launched by a combined armed force: the MRGU, the district guerrilla unit and the people's militia. By nightfall, all four military posts will be simultaneously attacked, each one by an NPA platoon. There will also be diversionary maneuvers. Synchronized with this there will be another raid on an enemy camp in a nearby village. Two more posts elsewhere in the province will be the target of snipers.

Ka Flavio says that I may accompany the medical team up to the first aid station, a kilometer or two from the frontline.

For my safety I get a Colt.45. According to international war conventions, a health worker is allowed to carry a weapon for self-defense. It is also a sign that



the kasama trust me, that I am one of them. Proud, I tuck away the revolver in my shoulder belt. Ka Bong and Ka Toto will accompany the fighting unit up to the frontline, Ka Flavio continues. For transporting the wounded, the medical staff is provided with six members from the people's militia.

I make myself acquainted with the kasama of the unit and see a number of men who two years ago belonged to Ka Louie's staff. Here is a group of strong, healthy, ready-to-fight kasama. Their weaponry is convincingly powerful: each has at least an M-16 or M14 automatic rifle, and there are some M-203 grenade launchers, a machine gun and a mortar. The weapons are cleaned and checked one last time.

Ka Flavio asks us to check on one of his men who has a painful swelling on his right thigh. An unripe abscess. He won't be able to join the action.

#### **A talk with Ka Flavio**

Ka Flavio asks if I have been briefed about the status of the revolutionary movement in Bicol. Yes, by Ka Louie two years ago. Time for updates, then. The NPA commander invites me to his hut. Fresh coffee has just been served in the kitchen. With a cup of black local coffee with lots of sugar, Ka Flavio begins to narrate:

"Just like in other regions, Bicol has been witness to a very rapid expansion in the years 1983-85, but this was followed by a gradual decline since the first years of the Aquino government. There are various reasons for that. Firstly, the enemy Special Operation Teams succeeded in penetrating some of our areas and eroding part of our mass base. That was possible because of the insufficient emphasis we had placed on strengthening the mass organizations.

"Secondly, the party leadership gave the highest priority on the NPA regularization. Big military formations and all sorts of military staff structures were put up. As a result, cadres, weapons and attention were withdrawn from party work and mass work. Thirdly, many sympathizers and even party members allowed themselves to be deceived by the supposed democratic character of the Aquino regime and turned their backs on the armed struggle. Finally, we were beset with the passivity of a number of elderly cadres who shunned confrontation with the enemy."

The counterinsurgency operations have thus proved to be effective here and there. I ask how this is precisely being carried out.

"The present counterinsurgency strategy of the Philippine armed forces is called gradual constriction. This is how it works. A massive and sustained attack



is undertaken against a particular guerrilla front. Military outposts and small detachments are then planted in the whole territory. Special Operation Teams carry out their counterrevolutionary organizing work. As a result, the area for maneuver and the mass base of the revolutionary movement is constricted and the guerrillas become easy prey.

"But, of course, we don't allow that to happen without putting up a fight. Early this year the NPA launched a military counter-campaign, called Kingfisher. A specific military outpost was targeted every month. To frustrate the enemy fighting force from concentrating on the main unit of the NPA, smaller NPA units also carry out operations elsewhere. The three attacks that we have undertaken so far were successful: the enemy detachments were simply wiped out. The TO that we are about to undertake ought to be the high point of our summer offensive."

Does that mean that the NPA in Bicol is again advancing?

"Indeed," replies Ka Flavio. "In 1989-90 we managed to check the downtrend. The CAFGU is not as strong as it used to be and finds it hard to recruit more members. Cory Aquino has exposed her true colors. The middle class is also through with her and we can surely rely on this sector for more support. In view of this, we have also managed to set up NDF structures on different levels, and we now have in Bicol our own publication and a weekly radio broadcast.

"But the most important reason for our advance lies undoubtedly in correcting our own mistakes and in thoroughly dealing with our shortcomings. We are again putting more emphasis on mass work instead of purely military work and we give more attention to education. We educate the kasama in our own Freddie Gacosta Cadre School."

Ka Flavio himself could be a model for this new batch of young cadres. He comes from a poor peasant family in the area and enjoyed only three years of schooling. "I have taken the rest of my education in the revolutionary movement," he says proudly.

### **Tactical offensive**

April 7. Maricel, Necel, Toto, Bong and I examine the contents of our medical kit and read more on trauma medicine. Ka Bong is brooding. He is concerned because not every NPA platoon has trained medics at its disposal, because we could not get any walky-talkies, because the vital first-aid station is situated too far from the frontline.



April 8. We leave at 3:15 p.m. The view of the long stretch of guerrilla line that traverses the hills of Bicol is impressive. After an hour, we stop to wait for darkness. We go up a slope. The Bicol peninsula is especially narrow here. On both sides we can see the sea, with hundreds of lights of fishers' boats. At 9:30 p.m. everyone looks for trees on which to hang his hammock.

April 9. Snoozed soundly. Leisurely we trek down near the river, where we will be camping for a day and a half. I make acquaintance with Jo-Ann, the lone woman in the fighting unit who is not a medic. She leads a squad of eight seasoned guerrillas.

April 10. D-day. We leave at 6:00 p.m. Step by step we shuffle forward. It is of crucial importance that we make no noise, the surprise element should be kept intact. In whispers the troops are counted and re-counted: we are 105 all in all. Around 9:00 p.m. we, the medical team, are left behind in the bushes. It is indeed far from the barrio, which lies at the other side of the hill. We are, therefore, not going to witness the fight.

At exactly 10:00 p.m. the shooting begins, simultaneously from different directions. Ka Maricel, who has recovered, is leading our group. Her leadership is needed because everyone is nervous. A masa, here to help us as carrier of wounded fighters, cannot suppress his cough, to the annoyance of someone else.

The fighting is heavy and long. After a couple of hours of tense waiting, I can no longer restrain my sleepiness. I doze off. Until a whistling stray bullet shoots by near us.

It is already 5:00 a.m. when the first patient arrives. It is Ka Narding. Just yesterday he was still showing me his nice Topsiders shoes seized from an enemy soldier. Now a bullet has gotten through one of his Topsiders and his heel is totally pierced. "Ka Miguel, this is not yet death, is it?" he asks worriedly. We give him a fruit juice and an anesthetic injection and bind his heavily bleeding wound. His buddies relate how the fight is going. Because the NPA team in the nearby village started shooting a couple of minutes too early, the military soldiers were forewarned. Thus, they got the chance to organize themselves better and offer heavier resistance. But the enemy has, meanwhile, been driven away from three of its four detachments.

An hour later the second wounded is brought in. Ka Elmo, the machine gunner, has been shot in the buttocks with the bullet going towards the pelvis. He has lost much blood. There was no medic present nearby to stop the bleeding and his platoon had not been informed about the exact position of the first-aid station. Ka Elmo is in shock. It is already bright, but still it takes quite an effort to set the intravenous line for a dextrose.



Fortunately, Ka Bong arrives. With him is Ka Roel, the most experienced medic of the company. Still suffering from the heavy stress brought about by the fighting, they immediately set out to work. They put out a urinary catheter and prepare for a blood transfusion. Now the search for a donor. Suddenly, all the NPA fighters around us appear to be too tired. Are the kasama afraid to donate blood? Or is this culturally determined? No time for discussion. It appears that Ka Elmo has A-type blood, just like me. I volunteer. At the edge of the bush, by morning glory and with shots being fired here and there in the background, I let half a liter of blood be taken from me.

### **The trip back**

We cannot afford to lose time, in no time a military helicopter can appear in the skies. We carry Ka Elmo in a hammock, bound to a bamboo pole. The bamboo pole rests on the shoulders of two kasama. We decide to move back while the blood transfusion is still going on. Ka Narding is also being carried in his hammock. Three other kasama have slight injuries.

We find it difficult especially with Ka Elmo, not only because he's in a serious condition, needing continued medical attention along the way, but also because our machine gunner weighs more than 80 kilos. The carriers are doing an excellent job. They quickly and systematically take turns negotiating this difficult mountainous terrain. The weight on the bamboo poles creates ugly abrasions on their shoulders, which they take lightly, though.

At a deserted house, we get a couple of hours' rest. We haven't eaten for 15 hours, so a few chickens are killed. Despite the military victory, Ka Jun, the company commander, keeps on swearing. It is only now that I learn that we have suffered one dead kasama: a boy who initiated the attack by shoving a homemade bomb, tied to a long bamboo pole, over the wall of the military camp. A bullet hit him straight in the forehead.

The rough Ka Jun is a man of few words. After the meal, he comes to me and grabs me by the shoulders. I have to swallow my tears. It's just too much for me: the fear and the stress I experienced, the tiredness, the joy over the victory, the sadness over the fallen kasama and the pride that we, as part of the medical team, have performed our job well.

We are all dead tired but we have to move on. We are a rather disorderly troop, the patients in our midst. As we enter the forest, three splendid colorful toucans fly flapping their wings, and as we step into a creek a swarm of fluttering white butterflies welcomes us. Even nature is celebrating our victory.



I feel lightheaded, as if those white butterflies are flapping about my head. Now I can also feel them tickling my stomach. I realize that I am on the brink of exhaustion because of lack of sleep, hunger, thirst and the loss of a half a liter of blood. And yet, I think again of our patients who are going through harder moments. Don't ask me how, but I survive the 30-kilometer walk back home. Which teaches me an important lesson: in a life-and-death situation, you can draw unexpected strength from your body and mind, you can still transcend yourself.

Tired as a dog, we reach the medical camp at 10:00 p.m. We leave Ka Elmo and Ka Narding at the small hospital. Ka Necel and another medic attend to them. One of the hospital beds is my place to sleep, but I can't sleep in spite of my exhaustion. The arrival of the patients, the animated stories about the tactical offensive and monitoring our problem patient Elmo keep me awake. This is one disadvantage being a doctor lying beside your patients--aside from the smell of urine, feces and pus.

### **Ka Elmo's operation**

April 12. To our surprise, the next morning Ka Elmo is able to talk. His blood pressure has normalized, but his wound is deep. Several internal organs have been affected. The patient has fever and his whole lower abdomen is painful. With Ka Bong I consider all the options. To bring Ka Elmo to a hospital "outside" presents a practically insurmountable security problem. It would also take too much time. On the other hand, to contact a friendly surgeon and request him to come to the guerrilla front would entail the loss of precious time, and we are also unsure of his answer. The only remaining option: perform the operation ourselves.

April 13. More than two full days after he was injured, we operate on Ka Elmo. Because the careful preparation has taken the whole morning, Ka Bong can only start the operation at 1:30 p.m. We begin with a cystostomy (a cut into the bladder) because the urinary catheter brought out too little and bloody urine. Through the peritoneum we see blood in the abdominal cavity. To trace it to its origin, we have to cut open the whole abdomen. It is a hell of a job to work our way through Ka Elmo's fat belly. In the abdomen, we find all sorts of small damage, but, fortunately, no major trauma.

Being inexperienced and insecure would-be surgeons, the operation takes us nine hours straight. The last hours, we have to operate using only flashlights. Nevertheless, both the surgeon and Ka Elmo measure up to the task. Around midnight Ka Elmo is carefully transported, up to the small hospital.



### **Ka Narding's hallucinations**

April 15. The recuperation of Ka Elmo is not going smoothly. Due to the ketamine anesthesia he is suffering from hallucinations. He keeps running a fever and his urine remains bloody.

Meanwhile, our other patient, Ka Narding with his tattered heel, is rather left on his own. His wound needs to be urgently cleaned under general anesthesia, a nice job for Ka Bong. The basic principle for such a *debridement* is that it should be done thoroughly, so that no dead tissue that could cause infection remains. Hence, Ka Bong scrubs the wound with a brush.

Of course the loquacious Ka Narding hallucinates quite a lot after the operation. His singing and stories make us laugh. He renders a local version of *Overal waar de meisjes zijn, daar is het bal* (Where the girls are, that's where the party is) and, looking at me, he sings: "Ka Miguel, I'll bring you to my barrio, and my brother will bake you a big bread."

April 17. The miraculously recovered Ka Elmo is leading the morning exercises. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he commands: "Foot sideward, 1-2-3-1, 1-2-3-2, 1-2-3-3!" Ka Narding helps in taking care of his wound and keeps making us laugh, even though he is no longer hallucinating. He jokes that because he, with some acrobatics, can look right through the wound in his heel, it is as if he were now carrying a telescope with him. Later, we see him using his two hands and a foot, all wearing slippers, coming down the path from the small hospital to the kitchen. What courage and optimism the kasama indeed have!

The big boss, Ka Flavio, comes to pay the patients a little visit. He helps treat their wounds. As he helps Ka Elmo stand up, the latter suddenly wants to move his bowels. Cheers everywhere, now that he has gotten back his intestinal functions, we know that he has gotten over his problems.

Undoubtedly, it is enormously beneficial to the patients to be in their natural surroundings and to recuperate in the company of their comrades. A scientific study should be done on that. I'm sure that the recovery process is a lot faster this way.

### **The tactical offensive evaluated**

After nursing the patients, I sit down under a tree before the clinic for a talk with Ka Flavio. I ask him about the results of the guerrilla action.

"The coordinated tactical offensive was a minor victory. Nine enemy elements were killed and 12 were wounded, while we ourselves suffered one



death and 7 wounded. Regarding confiscated weapons, they were not that many: only 8 automatic rifles. The military were able to position themselves and they fought to the bitter end. When they finally decided to flee, the majority still managed to take their weapons with them.

"Nevertheless, the action was definitely a propaganda victory. According to press reports and our own monitoring of military communications, the military leadership has really been thrown out of balance. They cannot understand how the NPA, that according to them has been weakened in Albay province, could attack so effectively at four places simultaneously."

And how did the residents of the barrio where the attack took place react, I want to know.

Ka Flavio smiles. "Of course, they panicked because of all the shooting. But we had assigned several NPA teams to deal with these reactions. They tried to calm the people and explain to them the objective of the attack. They had received specific instructions to seek out the wives of the CAFGU members. They requested them to persuade their husbands to leave the CAFGU and look for another job."

Ka Flavio puts the TO within the framework of the summer offensive of the NPA in Bicol: "It has been a success, both politically and militarily. The government army has suffered 37 dead and 34 wounded, not counting those in the police and in the CAFGU. Four military outposts were destroyed, and another four have been withdrawn by the army.

"What we are doing here is gradual constriction in reverse: it is the government army that is forced by our attacks to gradually retreat to bigger camps, which are situated at the periphery of our zone. That way, we manage to regain room for maneuver and we can again undertake our political and organizational work in the villages that we had to leave a few years ago."

### Going home

April 18. Now that our patients are recuperating well, it's time for the medical staff to conduct its own evaluation. We discuss our medical work during the TO, the actual goings-on in the camp, the operations and the post-operative management of the patients, as well as my stay here.

The time to say goodbye has come. Ka Bong, Ka Maricel, Ka Necel: it pains me to leave these fine comrades behind, probably for good. Ka Elmo becomes emotional and almost refuses to let go of my hand. Although I have not told him, I suspect that he got word that it was me who gave him blood.



April 20. After a 10-hour long bus trip and a jeepney ride through the searing heat of Manila, I get off at Broadway, near home. Along the small dirty river that serves as a collective garbage container, I walk hurriedly past the alley. Reaching the corner, it's only a 100-meter walk to our apartment. I am too excited to make my usual homecoming whistle and I push the screen door open. Yeah, Rita and Yuri are sitting comfortably at home and look like they're doing just fine.

Rita is expecting me. There is Magnolia ice cream in the refrigerator, the Flavor of the Month, and some ice-cold San Miguel beer. I have the whole night to share my story, to hear Rita's experience, to read the mail.

### Debate No. 0

April 21. Among the reading materials Rita has for me, a new publication catches my attention: *Debate*. It is being published in Amsterdam by prominent leftist Filipinos, like the political scientist Joel Rocamora and the liberation theologian Ed de la Torre. The magazine aims to offer a forum for discussion within the leftist movement. I plunge into reading this maiden issue, since interesting political literature is rather scarce here.

The two main articles discuss the analysis and strategy of the Philippine national-democratic revolution. Joel Rocamora writes about "Revolutionary Projects in the Third World and the End of the Cold War." He starts by praising Gorbachov, because "perestroika could bring the Soviet Union back into Marxist discourse with Third World progressives."

With this article, the scope of the pro-Gorbachov article in the CPP publication *Ang Bayan* a couple of months ago is becoming clearer to me. Just like the ideologues of capitalism, these authors seem to believe in the end of history, the end of ideologies. Because "the U.S. role (is) more circumscribed internationally" and Third World revolutionaries are now "less Stalinist" and therefore sensible, , compromises are now possible: a negotiated resolution of the conflicts should lead to a society with mixed economy where all classes, including the bourgeoisie, would be satisfied.

A certain Omar Tupaz writes about a negotiated settlement of the Philippine conflict. He admonishes the NDF to work out a strategy for peace negotiations in order to achieve its political objectives, because there is "a growing worldwide trend of negotiations becoming a more common feature in the resolution of armed conflicts." As examples, he cites the FMLN in El Salvador and the ANC in South Africa.



Are those really the examples that the Philippine movement should follow? Isn't Tupaz rather putting forth the following thesis: "The trend is that imperialism is reigning supreme, so just surrender and lay down your arms"? Debate and discussion, well and good. But if these are used to sow confusion and discouragement, I have my doubts about the usefulness and intent of this new publication.

## **Mara**

June 11. The birth of our second child was supposed to be on June 6, but it is only this morning that Rita's bag of water broke, the first sign of the approaching labor. The contractions begin in the afternoon. I monitor them, they're quiet and regular, yet with long pauses. At 4:30 p.m. I call Merly, the midwife; an hour later she arrives. She is amazed to see us outside sitting on a sofa and watch Yuri horsing around with his playmates. Inside, Merly examines Rita: already a 6-centimeter wide opening, time to prepare the instruments for the delivery. I bring a mattress and a pair of pillows to the back room, Rita readies the crib and Merly phones the gynecologist. I help Rita take a shower, and for every contraction--now getting stronger and stronger--we breathe together. At 9 o'clock I bring Yuri to bed. The boy notices that something is going on. He calls from his bed that he wants to drink, and then calls again, to pee. At 9:45 p.m. Rita deems it better to lie down in the chair. Hardly does she lie down when the first strong contraction arrives. We hurry to the back room. By the next contraction, we can already see the little head. The *doktora* talks of cutting, but Merly and I protest. Another contraction, a strong push and the head is out. It's a girl: Mara!

Yuri has been awakened by Mara's howling. He scrambles from his bed and wants to console the baby straight away. Big brother comes with a Duplo motorcycle toy and a glass of fruit juice for his little sister.

## **Apo Namalyari**

June 16. When we get up, it is as if our house had just been hit by a desert storm. Everything is buried under a layer of very fine, gray chalk-like dust, as if shaken out of a giant board eraser. Mara's birth was welcomed by great fireworks: after 600 years of drowsing, Mount Pinatubo has erupted, spewing fire and ash. The volcano stands in Central Luzon, about 100 kilometers from the capital, but an enormous cloud of ash has reached Manila.

Pinatubo is the holy mountain of the Aeta tribe. Their God who lives there, Apo Namalyari, is said to have been startled by the flight exercises of the American warplanes that take off from the nearby Clark Air Force Base. Thus this angry eruption.



The contract that covers Washington's rent of the military bases in the Philippines expires in September 1991. Although the new 1987 constitution prohibits all foreign military bases on Philippine soil, the Aquino regime is willing to grant the Americans a grace period. But the negotiations are not going smoothly, because the U.S. has no plans of paying more. Apo Namalyari changes the course of things: Clark Air Base is evacuated.

The U.S. has neither confirmed nor denied the presence of nuclear weapons in their Philippine bases. But according to the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, the nuclear alarm in Clark had been set off. In all haste, a convoy of mysterious trucks left the bases. To bring atomic bombs to safety? The 15,000 American soldiers and families, cats and dogs included, were quickly evacuated. The Filipinos working in the bases only got a laconic message that they did not have to report for work on that day.

The area around Mt. Pinatubo is heavily hit. Early estimates speak of more than 200 deaths, 180,000 refugees and billions of pesos worth of damage. Upon the initiative of the Council for Health and Development, the Samahang Operasyong Sagip, the common rescue operation, comes into action anew. Medical missions are organized to go the disaster area.

### **Integration visits**

July-August. Summer vacation in Belgium, so we'll be receiving many visitors. We look forward to these visits every year, for that means letters and packages from home. For our part, we can also send through them letters and gifts. And we can also chat about Belgium, the solidarity work, common friends.

Mostly, the people arriving are not the normal tourists, but travelers who come for exposure programs. That means that they opt to 'lay themselves bare' to the social realities of the country, to the daily life and work situation of the poor Filipinos, to the sufferings and struggles of the people. Through this, they acquire insights into the mechanisms of exploitation and oppression. They experience first-hand how the Filipinos are coping, how they organize, how they fight for their rights.

Such an exposure program can take different forms: general or specifically geared to a certain sector (workers, peasants, health workers, women), a short immersion or a long integration, observatory or participatory. But in any case an exposure program carries certain obligations. It should result in taking up or deepening a concrete commitment to the Filipino people's struggle. The string of visitors that arrive this year constitutes a fine sample.



Kurt, Greet, Sabine and Roland are health workers sent by *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* for an integration visit. They come not only to familiarize themselves with the projects relating to grassroots health care. They also sleep in a slum community and take part in a human rights fact-finding mission. They help in the evacuation centers in the Pinatubo area and conduct a small-scale research on the wrong use of medicines. When they go back to Belgium, they will conduct information meetings in their parish, with the youth movement and at workplaces, for family and friends. They will also do their best for the Philippine health projects being supported by the 11.11.11. campaign.

Anita, Geert, Mark, Pol 1 and Pol 2 are from the *Katholieke Arbeidersjeugd* (KAJ, Young Catholic Workers) in Waasland. The KAJ has been active on the Philippines for two years now, one of their projects being the exchange visit with its sister organization, the Young Christian Workers (YCW). For their hosts here, every KAJ member has brought an original gift: a colorful T-shirt of an anti-racist music festival, given by a Flemish KAJ militant. An address is written on each one, offering the possibility of personal correspondence. To be able to visually present the Philippine situation in Belgium, the KAJ team decides to take home various mementos, like the wooden box used by a street vendor, complete with cigarette packs and coins.

Koen is here for the second time. For years, he has been active in the solidarity work for the Philippine people's movement. No better way to recharge his batteries than another round of experiencing poverty and injustice and especially the fighting spirit of the people's organizations.

### Security perils

July 30. Three Party cadres who regularly work with Lean have been arrested! Quickly, I make a big clean-up of my papers and reading materials. Fortunately, a group of visitors is set to leave in two days. We can give them all our underground materials to pass on to Hilde Vannobberghen, the only person in Belgium who is aware of our UG connections. I hope the damage is limited and neither Lean nor ourselves will get into trouble.

August 6. Romulo Kintanar, the chief of staff of the NPA, is also arrested while on a consultation visit to an eye specialist at the Makati Medical Center, the biggest private hospital in Manila. Why are these high officials roaming around Manila in the first place? They would have been safer in a guerrilla camp. And how is it possible that they let themselves be trapped so easily?

As chief of staff, Kintanar is the direct higher-up of Lean's Medical Section. Panic ensues. But Ella drops by to reassure us that Lean is safe. I write to Hilde:



"I assume that you have heard from the NDF office in Utrecht about the serious security problems here. Lean could easily find a safe place, but for the NPA's medical work it is a disaster. The Medical Section is forced to freeze its activities. Just now that I am ready to join a training, it has been postponed. I am a bit stressed. Not enjoyable, but it's part of the struggle."

## Bases out

September 16. The treaty allowing the U.S. military bases on Philippine soil expires today. Following the unexpected departure of the Americans from Clark Air Base, President Aquino agrees without protest to a latest Washington proposal: a new treaty extending the stay of Subic Naval base for ten years, for a bargain price of 203 million dollar a year.

The essence of the agreement can be deduced from the handshakes between the two principal negotiators, Foreign Affairs Minister Raul Manglapus for the Philippine panel, and special envoy Armitage for the U.S. Manglapus, a shrunken little man with an old-fashioned short hair style, who tentatively extends his hand to Armitage and hardly dares to look him in the eye. Armitage, head and shoulders towering over Manglapus, with a broad Colgate-smile and heavy rings on each finger of his enormous claw, who firmly grasps Manglapus' little hand, almost crushing it to a pulp with obvious pleasure. Servant and master.

The people's movement has for years carried out protest actions against the U.S. bases, the symbol of U.S. imperialism. This year an International Peace Festival was held, with 140 representatives from 40 countries. There were many pickets in front of the bases and two big demonstrations in Manila.

Today there are 30,000 demonstrators despite the heavy rains. I join together with our visitor Koen. It brings back memories of big European peace marches of yore, with an exuberant, festive atmosphere. The expectation is that the Philippine Senate, under pressure from the people's movement, will today refuse to ratify the new treaty. When that indeed happens in the late afternoon, a party erupts on the streets. "BASES OUT!" is the call that reverberates everywhere.

## The ordeal of Ina Dao-Wan

October 12. Our *katulong* Mercy has been away for almost two weeks because her mother is sick. Today she is back. Before leaving the house, she gives us a letter:

"*Ate* (older sister) Rita and *Kuya* (older brother) Bert,



"We are giving you this letter to tell you how it has been with my mother. On September 30, we received the news from our uncle, Cresenciano Culangan, that his sister, Ina Damiana C. Dao-Wan, was in a serious health situation. He said that *Ina* (mother) had not eaten for the last three weeks; she could not even take liquid food or water.

"Everyone expects that she will die sooner or later, that's why Uncle Ciano asked us to return or send someone to the province to help with the financial problems. On the same day we decided to go, hoping to see Ina alive. We took the night bus to Bangued, in Abra province (in the northern mountain range, the Cordillera).

"On October 1, we reached Bangued and in the afternoon, the village of Malibcong. We spent the night there, tired from walking five hours in the rain.

"On October 2, 6 o'clock in the morning, we left in the direction of Bangilo, where we arrived at 11:30. Our mother looked sick and skinny. Our brothers and sister thought that Ina could no longer hold out. Her dextrose had already been used up. We tried to use coconut juice as alternative, but because that caused Ina a lot of pain we decided not to go on with it.

"At that moment, Ina was not responding well and she could no longer distinguish the people around her. We prayed together and said to each other that we should be prepared for everything.

"A few days later, we decided to bring Ina to the hospital, unsure whether or not she would survive the trip. We sent a message to the parish priest, requesting him to provide a jeepney that could bring Ina to the hospital on October 6.

"Among us brothers and sisters, a long discussion ensued about this decision, especially about the financial aspect of the hospitalization. The people of the village have enough of their own worries: their daily food, diseases in the community and the presence of the military.

"In the area, there has been no stop to military operations, especially since last week after an armed encounter between the government army and the New People's Army. The people are afraid to bring their sick to the jeepney stop, because along the way, you would pass by military outposts where you would be interrogated. The soldiers could suspect them as communist sympathizers.

"On October 6, 4 o'clock in the morning, we left with Ina. Despite the pain and the hardships, because we had to hurry up to negotiate the mountainous terrain, we managed to reach the waiting jeepney on time.



"Around 6:00 p.m., we reached the hospital in Bangued. Ina was not immediately accepted. We panicked because she was no longer responding. But after a while, she was taken in and was given oxygen and a dextrose. She also got a blood transfusion, which improved her condition.

"With this letter, we would like to tell you that we are experiencing a big problem. No longer with mother but with the hospital bills, which at this time (after a week) already amount to 7,925 pesos. We ask you to help us shoulder our responsibility. To be honest, our money is just enough for our food and house rent, because we have also spent so much for the trip to the province.

"We hope that you can be with us in our struggle for life. We thank you in advance for your support.

"Warm greetings,

"Mercy"

Rita and I decide to shoulder part of the hospital bill. We pay Mercy's salary two months in advance and publish her letter with an appeal for help in our newsletter.

### Debate No. 1

We get a new copy of *Debate*. Omar Tupaz again writes an article on "Revolutionary Strategy for the '90s." He says that the strategy of protracted people's war in the countryside should be abandoned because that takes too long! As alternative, he suggests a "shortcut to victory" through people's uprising in the cities, *a la* Nicaragua.

But what has happened to the Nicaraguan revolution? The Sandinistas have agreed to elections under pressure and on the conditions set by the U.S., elections that they lost to Violeta Chamorro, the U.S.-supported candidate. In the last years of their rule, the Sandinistas carried out structural adjustments to the Nicaraguan economy with a neo-liberal recipe. That meant the undermining of the gains of the revolution. It is clear that the Sandinista "shortcut" has not led to a lasting and progressive model of society.

Tupaz' writings and Lean's comment that there is a heated debate in the movement over what strategy to follow rings a bell for me. Did last year's strike, the *welgang bayan* during which passenger buses were burned, perhaps fit in the strategic concept of people's uprising in the cities?



Tupaz asserts further that the legal mass movement can have the same influence and impact as the armed struggle. It is not logical that he is writing this in a period that the people's movement in the cities is experiencing a lull compared to some five years ago. The couple of militant demonstrations against the oil price hike have yielded no tangible results. The *welgang bayan* has gotten no follow-up. And the legal peasant movement has to bow before the law of the strong, the big landlords.

The intensifying counter-insurgency of the government army is an indication that the regime knows perfectly well from which direction the most serious threat comes, namely from the mountains, where the NPA organizes and arms the people, and not from the cities, where demonstrations and strikes can be checked with police repression and human rights violations.

My thoughts go back to Chile. The socialist experiment of Allende was admired by many but, in the end, it was smothered in blood. When I was in Chile ten years ago, the people's movement had not recovered from this blow. I also thought of Indonesia, where an uprising strategy of the mostly unarmed revolutionary movement led to a horrible bloodbath. Between 500,000 and 1 million peasants and intellectuals were slaughtered on suspicion of communist sympathies.

Omar Tupaz writes that the guerrilla movement may not aspire for "total victory". That is unattainable, unrealistic, he says. But is a "partial victory" of the exploited and oppressed over their exploiters and oppressors realistic? How can the people have a "partial liberation" from their chains? And should the people accept a half-solution for their misery? These armchair revolutionaries agitate me. They try to paralyze the revolution with their long articles and flamboyant words. On the ground I experience what the revolution is all about. For millions of poor peasants it offers for the first time a concrete improvement of their situation and a meaningful perspective for the future.

The year is about to end, time to discuss with Rita about our future. We have just signed a two-year contract with the CHD and Bevrijde Wereld as NGO workers, until late 1993; after that we are thinking of terminating our work in the Philippines. Six years is a long time. I myself would find it difficult to secure a better position elsewhere with regard to job and political work. But for Rita, not all has turned out the way she expected. She is stuck in Manila, has had to do a lot of office work, and she does not get the opportunities for political experience that I have, with my visits to the guerrilla zones. With the little Mara with her, Rita has not been very useful for the CHD this last half-year. There is no crèche in the office, and because we deem it irresponsible to expose the child daily to the smog of Manila, Rita has to do a lot of her work at home.





**Figure 1. "We visit the infamous Smokey Mountain, the giant garbage dump of Manila"**



**Figure 2. "With Tatay Dicoy and other inhabitants of the small fishing village Sitio Laghit on the northern coast of Negros."**





Figure 3. "At dusk, the villagers come to the terrace in front of Tatay's small house, wanting to mix with the foreigners. Royal Cola and cheap brandy are served."



Figure 4. "Bert at work in the library of the Council for Primary Health Care, located in the tourist and prostitution belt of Malate."





Figure 5. Mulanay. "For an educational course, this place certainly cannot be described as luxurious. Just a straw mat, or banig, to sleep on. No toilets, only the wide nature beyond. Through the splits in the floor, I can see a pair of black pigs."



Figure 6. Quezon. "In the half-dark a guerrilla camp unravels before my eyes. A feeling of satisfaction wells up in me. I have succeeded, I am with the New People's Army!"





Figure 7. Quezon. "We have to wade through a river, 34 times all in all, under the scorching sun. The river meanders through a landscape of soft rolling hills with coconut palms and sunken, bright green ricefields."



Figure 8. Bicol. "We remain hidden in the cave. Boring. And outside, it continues to pour."





Figure 9. Bicol, with the wounded Nelia. "Lina and Maricel perform a quick surgical wound cleaning under local anesthesia."



Figure 10. Bicol. "We try to liven up the boring subject by the didactic use of banana stems, coconuts or bamboo. With all this, we can visualize, for example, how to administer spinal anesthesia."



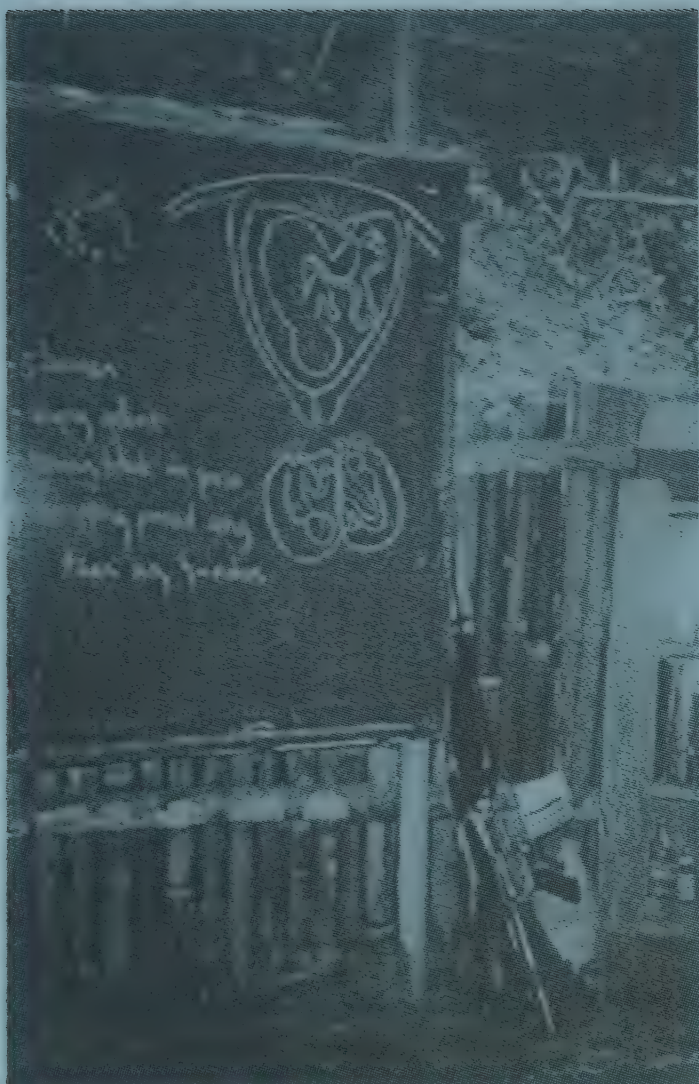


Figure 11. Bicol. "Each surgical team can practice for one day on a dog. All aspects of the operation, up to the minutest details, are prepared for and carried out as if it concerned a human patient."



Figure 12. Bicol. "It is the newly trained medics who perform the operations, with minimal supervision and a helping hand from Ka Apol for surgery, and from me for anesthesia."





**Figure 13. Northern Luzon.**  
**"That same afternoon we improvise a course on pregnancy and childbirth. Using colored chalk, Ka Apol draws the female anatomy on the blackboard."**



**Figure 14. Pampanga.** **"A part of every medical mission is devoted to giving health information and education, e.g. how to make cough syrup from medicinal herbs."**





Figure 15. Bicol. "We carry Ka Elmo in a hammock, bound to a bamboo pole. The bamboo pole rests on the shoulders of two kasama. We decide to move back while the blood transfusion is still going on."



Figure 16. Manila. "I am one of the lecturers in a course on Women and Health. We pay attention to pregnancy, childbirth, contraception, abortion, sexuality and violence against women."



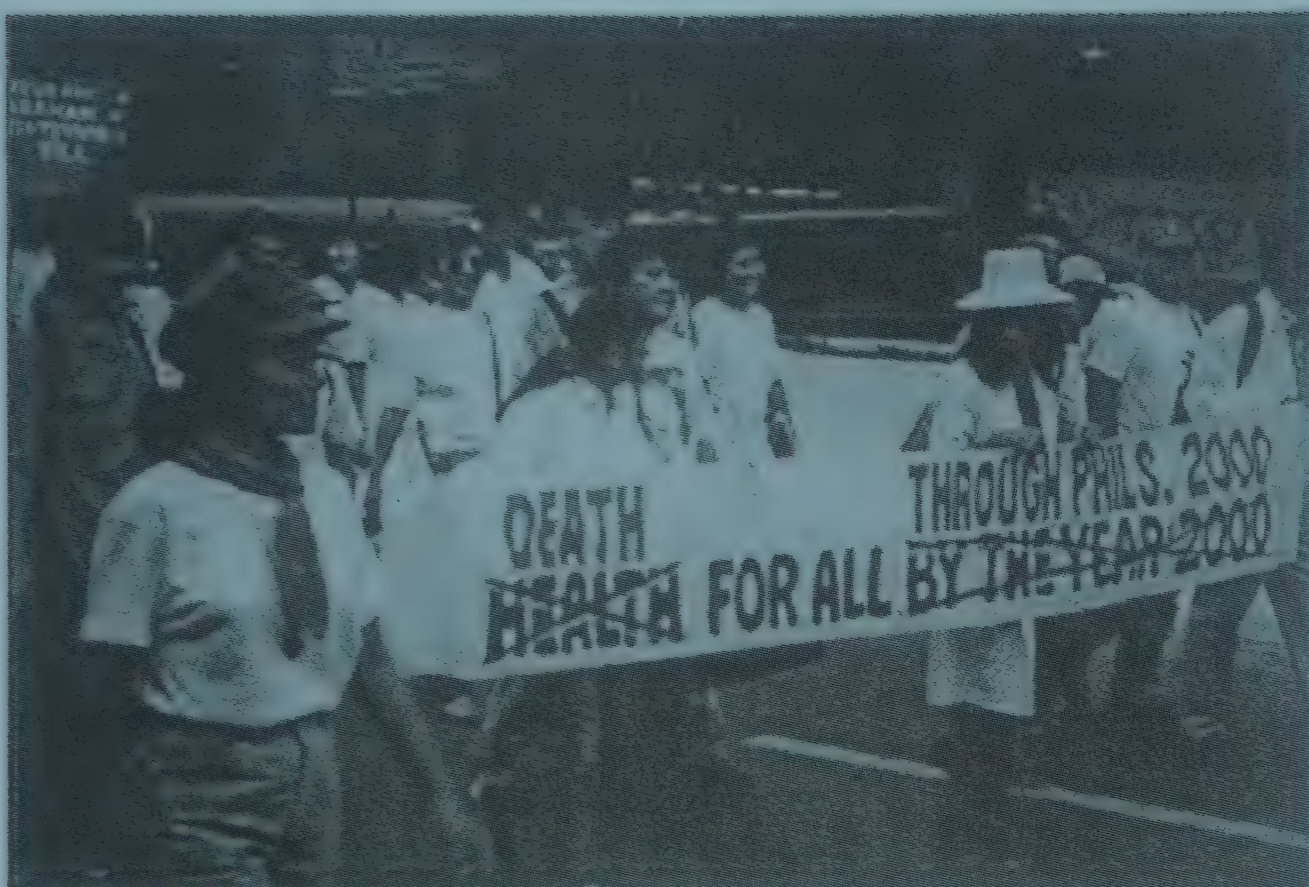


Figure 17. Manila. "The Health Alliance for Democracy is the militant organisation of the health workers." Here during a rally against Ramos' Philippines 2000 'development' plan."



Figure 18. Mindoro. "Medical consultations in open air, sitting on bamboo poles. With four doctors, including me, we treat 138 patients."





Figure 19. Rita with Pina in the Gabriela office



Figure 20. Talaingod. "In the afternoon we reach sitio Tibucag, a half deserted village of simple bamboo huts."



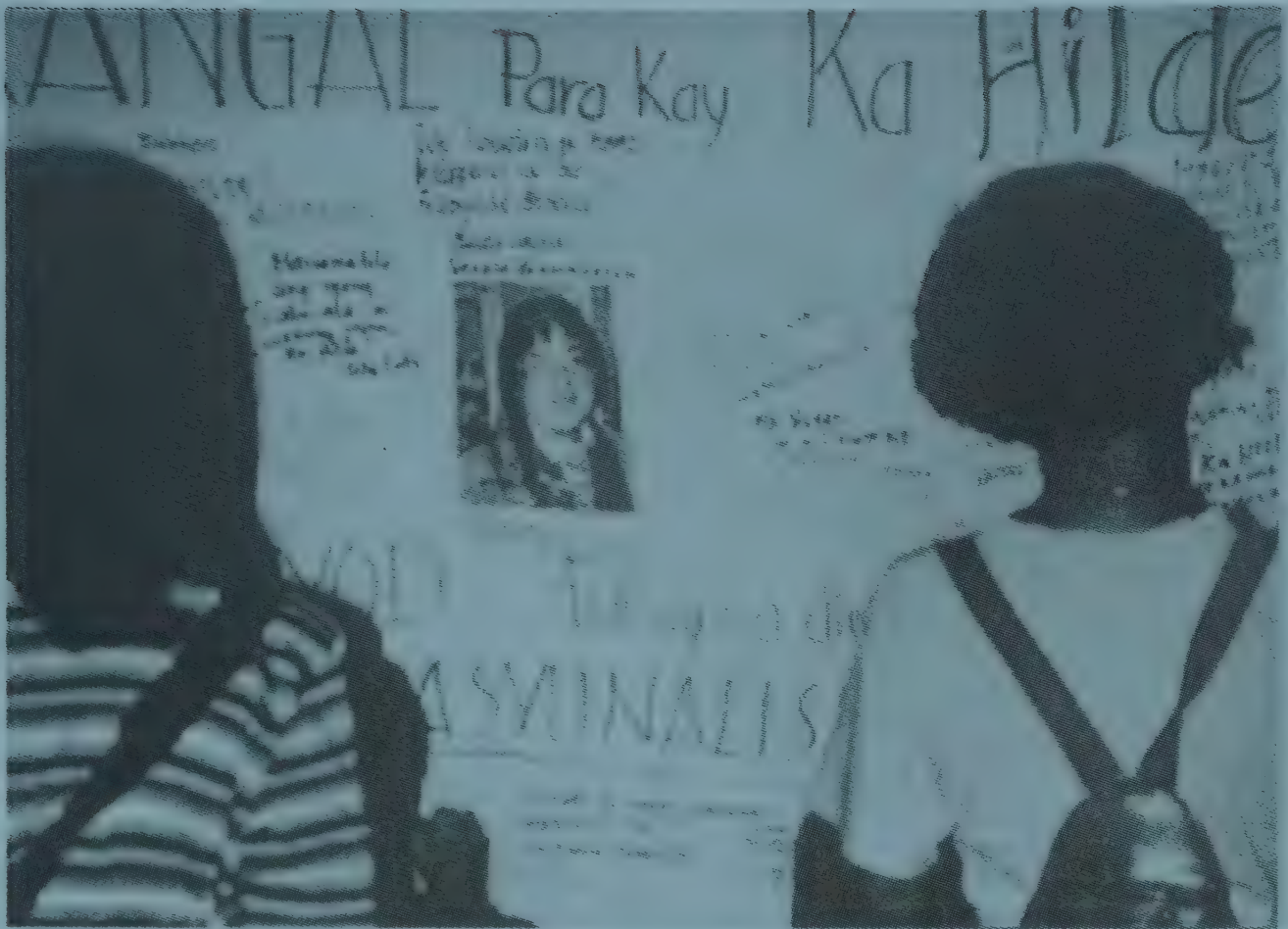


Figure 21. Manila. The parangal (farewell for the dead) of Hilde Vanobberghen. Messages of sympathy and solidarity.



Figure 22. Manila. Our family at Hilde's parangal, with Crispin Beltran, the chairman of the KMU, Dr. Delen dela Paz of HEAD (second from left) and friends from CHD.





Figure 23. Mindanao. "Yuri, Mara and Lize never get tired of looking at goats, carabaos, cows, pigs, cocks and chickens. They use banana leaves to protect themselves from the sun."



## Chapter Six

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### Which Love Is Greater Than This ... 1992

#### Panay

February 18, 1992. An exuberant team of 35 health workers is getting off a plane on the small airport of Kalibo, located on the northern coast of Panay island. The Council for Health and Development (CHD) is on a mission! Aside from the CHD staff, there are five surgeons, two anesthetists, two dentists and a few medical and nursing students. For five days this team will hold consultations and carry out operations in the small village of Naile.

This is an initiative of Fr. Marlon, Naile's parish priest. Fr. Marlon has learned of the CHD from the network of basic Christian communities. He wants to start a community-based health program in his parish. To give it a speedy start and immediately address the most acute health problems of his parishioners, he asked CHD to hold a medical mission.

Barring extending emergency help, I have my doubts on the efficacy of such a mission. An artificial transplantation of health workers from outside, instead of starting with one's own community. Immediately having specialists, with their medicine-oriented approach and high technology, instead of having village health workers at the core, with simple means and their eyes open to the social-political context. Medical miracles as manna from heaven, yet after just a week the people will have to fall back on the inadequate public health service or the unaffordable private medical practice.

But who am I to deny the people of Naile this rare chance of finally being operated on for hernia or goiter? Of being given ointment that would relieve them, even for a couple of months, from fungal infections? Or having their blood pressure checked, which radio broadcasts so often talk about?

It is certainly a positive thing that this activity is being considered as an impetus aimed at putting up a basic health care project. Further, a medical mission is a way of moving Manila-based health workers away for a while from their unreal, well-protected and comfortable existence and plunge them into the real life of the Filipinos in the countryside.

And who knows, maybe the kasama from the NPA, given their ingenuity, can somehow avail of this medical mission. It would not surprise me if some of



the patients were actually NPA members seeking treatment and some much-needed medicines.

In two fully loaded jeepneys we drive our way to Naile. This small and quiet village rests on the other side of a shallow stream that we cross with a rickety raft.

February 22. Mission accomplished. It was swarmed by people, many of whom had not seen a doctor in their lifetime. We were divided into three teams. The first team formed the headquarters in Naile. The parish church was converted into a makeshift clinic, complete with doctors, dentists and laboratory technicians. The second team left for Aparicio, a two-hour's walk inland. The third team took care of the surgery and was posted in the district hospital of Ibajay, the nearest town.

After a day of consultations in Naile, I was asked to join the surgery team. Every day, from 9 a.m. to 10 at night, undertaking operations; in the morning at 5 o'clock, being awakened by the church bells and once, at 4:30 in the morning, when a group of bald-shaved, grim-looking CAFGU soldiers came jogging through the village, singing and shouting.

As a token of gratitude, Fr. Marlon is taking us on a day-trip to Boracay. On this magnificent island on the coast of Panay, you find the best of the best tropical beaches. The Church lay workers have prepared delicious barbecue. With Fr. Marlon leading us, we leave for the *Beachcomber*, a big open-air disco pub. Not having gone to a party for quite some time, I feel these irresistible itches. On the first notes of Bob Marley, I lose no time removing my shoes and storm the dance floor.

### **Election Campaign**

February 23. On our way back there is a delay at the Kalibo airport. Beside us on the tarmac is the presidential aircraft. Cory Aquino is arriving in Panay to endorse her candidates for the elections.

All eyes are set on the elections of May 8, 1992, the biggest in the history of the Philippines: for the presidency, parliament, provincial and local levels. The majority of the candidates are real *trapo*. *Trapo* stands for traditional politicians, but also means rag. Freely translated, it means skunk. Such politicians are, after all, only eyeing their personal enrichment, that they attain through graft and corruption.

The three or four big parties can hardly be differentiated from one another. A social scientist made a comparative research on the party programs and



encountered a problem. The ruling party, the LDP, simply has no program at all. Opportunism and lust for power make many candidates *balimbing*. The *balimbing* is a tropical fruit which, if cut crosswise, looks like a five-pointed star. Each point is seen to represent a facet, and so the *balimbing* is deemed to have five faces.

A number of candidates who are not deemed to be *trapo* are a colorful bunch: film stars, TV hosts, a famous female cook, the puritanical head of the film and TV censors' board, the head of the seismological service (who became popular because of the Pinatubo), the mother of a victim of a well-publicized murder case, etc. And Imelda Marcos, the widow of the former dictator.

For our newsletter, Rita writes an article based on a newspaper item:

"Kardo is a 40-year-old unemployed slum resident to whom life has never had much to offer. But that has changed. Until the May 8 elections are over, Kardo has no reason to worry. He has a job, one that is definitely a piece of cake. All he has to do is to stand for hours and, on cue, to cheer and clap.

"Kardo is a member of the 'paid brigade', the rented fan club of a rich election candidate. For every election campaign, Kardo and his mates are made to wear elegant clothes and if possible a pair of shoes. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, they are picked up and brought to the place where the candidate will speak. They would mix with the crowd unnoticed, and as soon as their man appears on stage, they would start shouting and clapping.

"For one night I get 100 pesos," beams Kardo. His job lasts for only three months. But the clever Kardo has prepared for the lean days. He plays supporter for three different candidates. 'This is the only time when we can get something from the politicians,' he knows fully well."

### **The Reaffirm Analysis**

April-May-June. For our biannual vacation in Belgium, Rita and I, together with Yuri and Mara, stay once again with Hilde Vannobberghen, who is now a doctor in the people's clinic *Geneeskunde voor het Volk* (Medicine for the People) in Mechelen. Aside from her medical practice, she is more active than ever in the Third World movement and in the Workers' Party of Belgium. She has made herself the key person in of the Philippine solidarity work in Belgium, and even in Europe.

The ongoing debate within the Philippine national-democratic movement has caused great havoc in the European solidarity movement. Most of the groups, with which I have spoken just two years ago, are in crisis. They have let



themselves be swept by the new wind that dangles illusions about elections, peace negotiations, and socialist renewal *a la* Gorbachev. And they are now distancing themselves from the rectification movement that the Communist Party of the Philippines is preparing.

They have read the first version of "Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Our Errors", written by the party chair, Armando Liwanag. This internal document of the party will be discussed at the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee. But the dissidents have already spread the document not only in Manila but also in Europe, and are making a lot of hullabaloo about it. At the NDF office in Utrecht, we get hold of a copy of *Reaffirm*. After all, we want to know what the discussion is all about.

The document asserts that grave ideological, political and organizational errors have been committed by the Communist Party in the course of the '80s and that these errors have caused the movement serious damage.

The gravest error is the idea that a quick victory for the revolution could be forced by launching an armed insurrection in the cities, combined with military offensives by big guerrilla formations with heavy weapons. Through this, the emphasis shifted from organizational work and small guerrilla units at the base, to bigger military units and staff organs at the top; from mainly political work to almost purely military work; and from the countryside to the cities.

This has made the guerrilla fronts vulnerable to the counter-insurgency operations launched by the government military. In Mindanao, where this strategy was initiated, the NPA suffered more and more defeats, which were wrongly attributed to the infiltration of enemy deep penetration agents (DPAs) within the ranks of the NPA. With the intention of cleansing the organization of DPAs, a hysteria followed. Without due process and on the basis of false or fabricated accusations, hundreds of kasama became victims.

There were also errors of right opportunism in the same period, like the analysis that the Soviet Union and its allies could and must be befriended, with the aim of getting diplomatic recognition and heavy arms. The earlier criticisms of the CPP on the revisionist degeneration of the Soviet Union since Khrushchev were swallowed.

A number of CPP high cadres also put too much emphasis on the mistake of the movement to boycott the presidential election of 1986, when Cory Aquino ran against dictator Marcos. These cadres were of the opinion that the movement should form a united front with the bourgeois opposition supporting Aquino and join a coalition government after her victory. They also pleaded for more attention to peace negotiations and elections, over and above the armed struggle.



The articles in *Debate*, the discussions with Ka Lean, the explanation of Ka Flavio had already made it clear to me that there was something amiss within the movement. But the consequence of the overwhelming series of errors that *Reaffirm* analyses comes as a thunderbolt in a clear blue sky: the mass base of the movement has shrunk to its level of 1983-1984! We, who had thought of tasting the victory of the liberation movement right here in the Philippines, have instead become witness to its decline, without our realizing it.

*Reaffirm* states that the downtrend can only be averted by upholding the basic principles of the Philippine revolution: the analysis of the Philippine society as semicolonial and semifeudal; the national-democratic character of the revolution; the strategy of protracted people's war; the leading role of the working class and its party, the CPP; and the critique of revisionism that led to the restoration of capitalism in the East bloc.

At the international office of the NDF in Utrecht, it is considered more advisable to await the outcome of the debate before investing anew on intensive solidarity work for the NPA in Europe. I therefore decide to concentrate on a few pilot projects.

I fly to Oslo to look for orthopedic surgeon Hans Husum. Hans has years of experience as a war surgeon in Afghanistan and Lebanon, and he has also been to the Philippines. He is working on a standard book on traumatology. I sound him out if he is interested in passing on some of his knowledge and experience to the NPA medics.

At the Oslo airport, the police takes me aside, while all the other passengers are allowed to go through. My luggage is emptied; an agent zealously leafs through all my papers and brochures, and they want to know whom I have come to visit in Norway. This can hardly be a coincidence, and it surprises me how efficient the international police apparatus functions. Next time be careful, Bert-Miguel-Peter!

### **Ramos For President**

We follow the Philippine elections from Belgium. This time the Philippines is again in the news, and I am asked by the BRTN Radio and the BRTN TV news for interviews.

With less than 24% of all the votes cast, Fidel Ramos becomes president. A tragicomic affair, these elections. Tragic because the Filipino voter brings to power someone from whom nothing good can be expected. An ex-general as president reinforces the trend of the increasing militarization of the regime.



Ramos finished his military education at the American West Point Academy. And as head of the dreaded Philippine Constabulary--the state police--he was the most important executor of Marcos' bloody martial law.

Comical was the theatrics of the biggest loser, Miriam Defensor. She asserted that fraud denied her of victory--which is not implausible--and staged a hunger strike in protest, "following the footsteps of Gandhi". But she had her hunger strike in a luxurious hospital suite, with dextrose full of vitamins and liters of sweet tea. After three days she stopped her strike.

The Filipinos also massively voted film stars, comedians, TV-personalities and sports celebrities into the Lower House and the Senate. Anyway, that's what you do in a circus: you rather choose the real clowns than their political clones, don't you?

### **As A Tourist In Manila**

July 4. Problems at the Manila airport: the customs officials will not register baby Mara's name either on my visa or on Rita's. She may be allowed in her country of birth only as a tourist with a visa for 21 days! It should be put into order at once, warns the customs official, otherwise Mara De Belder will become an illegal alien. The poor child will have to undergo medical and AIDS examinations, and she has to be fingerprinted three times. Just at the last moment, our one-year-old daughter is exempted from signing her name and undergoing a psychological examination.

Some office friends have stayed in our apartment, and we find it neat and orderly. But our *katulong* Mercy has found a job, as telephone operator in a parish church. Her younger sister Celia will replace her.

July 10. This time, the adjustment is less smooth. The heat and bustle of Manila and the seven-hour time difference are taking their toll. Yuri and Mara have trouble with prickly heat. Fortunately, the rainy season has begun this week, resulting in a lower temperature by a few degrees.

Yuri courageously goes back to school, equipped with a hat, backpack and a children's umbrella. There is a big change in Rita's job. It has been agreed upon within CHD that Rita can work for the Commission on Women and Health of GABRIELA. The office is only a short jeepney-ride away from home and has a nursery for Mara. The work of the Commission to establish the links between primary health care and the women's question is really something for Rita.



## To Lacub

July 20. Rita's sister Hilde arrives again for a visit. She is being sent here by the *Steunfonds Derde Wereld* to evaluate an ongoing health project in Lacub, which is being financed by the Steunfonds. I decide to accompany Hilde. Lacub lies in Northern Luzon, just next to the village where Mercy and Celia come from.

The medical training as part of the Lacub project is being taken cared of by Chestcore, an NGO that forms part of CHD. We leave with three staff members of Chestcore, Abby, Gigi and Boy. It takes us ten hours to reach the province's capital Bangued, two hours more than planned because all traffic around the Pinatubo area has been detoured. This area is again ravaged by lahar (volcanic mudflow) and flooding.

July 21. In Bangued we pay a courtesy call to Lacub's vice-mayor. A flabby man in shorts, T-shirt and slippers. On the table, in front of him, are three empty beer bottles, and he very soon opens more bottles. During the whole rainy season, seven months per year, this man prefers to enjoy the comforts of the city than stay in his muddy village.

He laments: "We have no electricity in Lacub. There is no public school and the only private school charges a 1,000-peso registration fee, which many peasants in Lacub cannot afford. A small health post is present though, with a midwife. But the lack of medicines forces her to close her office half of the time." However, the vice-mayor definitely does not appear to go out of his way to improve the situation.

We rent a jeepney for a three-hour ride that resembles a Camel Trophy ride. The road, officially a provincial one, has never seen asphalt. The funds for this have disappeared into the pockets of corrupt politicians. Only jeeps with the motor of a truck and with heavy chains can survive the deep holes, big stones and steep slopes. And finally they end up stranded before a wide river, where the bridge has collapsed a long time ago.

We have to wade through the breast-high heavily swollen stream and then move further on foot. It is going to be a steep uphill and downhill hike along muddy trails. Damned difficult. The rain doesn't stop, we are drenched. But our efforts are amply rewarded by the wonderful landscape: green hills with a mosaic of irrigated rice terraces. The indigenous people have proudly maintained these architectural masterpieces for generations.

It is past six o'clock and already dusk when we reach Lacub. The village center is swarming with military soldiers. Here is one government entity that



does not ignore Lacub! Abby knows her way around here and throws a friendly smile at the soldiers.

### **The Story of Manang Minda**

Boy, who supervises the project in Lacub, brings us to the house of Manang Minda. This sinewy woman of about 50 is one of the leading health workers in the project. While serving a plate of steamy rice and sardines, she explains why the military are present in Lacub:

"Two weeks ago, an army patrol encountered a group of NPAs in a nearby village. The soldiers opened fire, but they were fired back upon. A soldier was killed. The military forced a villager to get the knapsack left behind by the dead soldier. The poor man dared not refuse, but when he went to pick up the knapsack the military shot him dead."

Manang Minda pauses for a while and then sighs: "That is how the military are doing their work here. And since that day they have kept hanging about the village."

Hilde and I are shocked to hear Minda's story. Our Filipino friends appear to take it relatively easier. Are these incidents so common here, or could it be that this apparent indifference is their way of hiding their inner feelings? We discuss with Abby this dastardly act of the soldiers. Did they want to exact revenge for the death of their colleague? Was it an attempt to put the blame on the NPA for killing civilians? Or was it their way of being able to report to their superiors 'one CT down', one less 'communist terrorist'? Whatever the reason was, incidents like this only stir up the people's hatred of the military and the fire of rebellion.

### **A Community Project**

July 22. After breakfast, we go to visit the project site. A small clinic will be put up here, run by village health workers themselves and with regular medical consultations with a doctor from the Chestcore. A piece of land has been set aside for the building; the plan has been drawn up; the money is now available; and the people of Lacub are all supportive. Nevertheless, the project has to wait for the dry season because almost all building materials have to be transported from Bangued.

About ten village health workers and representatives of community organizations in the outlying barrios have come down to Lacub to discuss the project with us. They apologize profusely for the delays in the implementation of the project. They also apologize that not every health worker is there to



welcome us: everybody is busy on the fields; with the rains, rice must be transplanted. Mang Rudy, apparently the spokesperson, states that the health workers have all followed different medical courses in the previous year. And while waiting for the clinic, a cabinet in Manang Minda's house has become the temporary village pharmacy. Afterwards, the building plans are discussed in detail. All of them make comments and give suggestions.

### **The Military In Action**

July 23. A tense atmosphere envelops the village when we wake up. Men are walking here and there, children are being called to come home. A boy rushes into Manang Minda's house, saying: "The soldiers are calling all adult men to congregate at the village square." Why? No one knows.

Abby approaches an officer and asks if we could visit the village health workers in the nearby village Picopoc. He replies: "Just wait till we release all the men, then you can go back to Picopoc with them." Release? Have they been arrested? On what charge?

Suddenly a muffled bang from far away. Hilde and I look at each other. A second bang. Boy confirms our suspicion: 'Mortar fire'! Our anger and indignation rises with every new mortar attack.

Manang Minda has found out more from the neighbors. The military authorities assert that, following the encounter two weeks ago, there are five more bodies of NPA members lying in the forest. The soldiers are instructed to get these bodies, but because they dare not enter the woods themselves, mortar shots had to be fired first in that direction. The village men must now comb the forests to search for the bodies.

The women are nervous, afraid that something terrible may happen to their husbands. Since the soldiers have to find five dead bodies at all cost, they are capable of anything. Fortunately, the villagers safely return that night--without the bodies. They narrate the outrageous acts of the military soldiers: a corn harvest was set on fire; part of the stock of rice and a pig were confiscated for the soldiers' lunch. After the search operation, the military commander ordered that 85 men of the village must enlist themselves with the CAGU. Should they refuse, the army would be forced to leave the people to their fate and to the 'NPA terror'. 'How I wish they would do that,' someone comments.

Everybody now sits comfortably at the terrace of Manang Minda's house, and she lavishes us with Filipino hospitality. Delicious fruits are being passed around, as well as drinks, a kind of gin that contains sugarcane wine and gets stronger as the time passes. We begin to speak freely. With Abby as translator--



the local language is Ilocano--Hilde and I take the occasion to ask the people of Lacub about the New People's Army. Are they not going to put the blame on the guerrillas for the military repression? Has the NPA, through its operations, provoked the government army?

"First and foremost", explains Mang Rudy, "it is not the fault of the NPA that the peasants are poor or that there are no social services, but rather the fault of the big landlords and the powers-that-be in Manila."

A little old lady adds: "We don't have any problems with the NPA. At least they pay us when they need rice."

A man joins in: "And when we had technical problems with a project of the cooperative, was it not the kasama who helped us, in words and deeds?" The others nod.

"And as far as repression is concerned," says Manang Minda, "we experienced this already even before the first NPAs arrived in Lacub."

## A Torture

July 24. Abby, Gigi, Boy, Hilde and I bid farewell to Manang Minda and the people of Lacub. First, a five-hour trek back to that collapsed bridge. Tough luck: the jeepney driver who is supposed to pick us up here is nowhere to be found. No reason to worry, less than two hours ahead is a road crossing where two other jeepneys would certainly pass by, says Boy. Another tough luck: neither of the jeepneys show up. Just go on walking, with the knowledge that the next village is still a number of kilometers further. A jeep passes us by. The passengers announce that "3 to 4 kilometers further" we'll find a small truck for road workers that can take us. Those "3 to 4 kilometers" are actually 6 to 7 kilometers (along this godforsaken gravel road stand these nice yellow kilometer markers!) and the promised truck is no longer there.

No time for disappointment, or at least not too much. The jeep that has just left will definitely come back tonight and will save our day. But the night comes and there is no jeep in sight. Then off again, now wearing slippers because our tortured feet have begun bursting out of our shoes. To keep up our courage, we begin to sing, from Bella Ciao to Simon & Garfunkel. Two hours later, our perseverance pays off. An overloaded jeep passes by and we convince the driver to take five more desperate passengers. At ten o'clock that evening we reach Bangued, exhausted, famished, drenched with rain and sweat.



August 29. From a letter sent home:

"We've just had another strong typhoon, with everything that goes with it: strong wind, heavy rainfall, cold--we shiver here as the mercury falls below 25 degrees centigrade--and the ashes of the Pinatubo are blown up to here. Many streets are under water. The traffic is entangled more than ever, and the brownouts are more frequent and longer. For two days, there is no school for Yuri."

### **The Rectification Movement Begins**

September 13. Unexpectedly, Lean pops up for an important piece of news. The much talked-about Tenth Plenum of the CPP Central Committee is over. The *Reaffirm* document has been approved, with a number of amendments on the earlier version. Within the party, the people's army and the revolutionary mass organizations an all-encompassing rectification movement is being launched to reaffirm the basic principles of the Philippine revolution.

Nineteen resolutions have also been passed. One of these states that all national staff organs of the New People's Army must be dissolved, including the Medical Section of Ka Lean. The putting up of national staff organs was in the framework of the wrong orientation of premature regularization of guerrilla troops as a conventional army that is provided with heavy weapons needed to carry out ever bigger military actions. Most staff organs have shown the tendency to become cumbersome, bureaucratic structures, far detached from the work among the masses. With a bit of pride, Ka Lean says that the Medical Section was cited as an exception.

### **Women and Health**

September 15. Rita writes in our newsletter:

"In July and August, I was one of the lecturers in the course on Women and Health held in Manila and attended by women health workers from Panay, Negros and Mindanao. Apart from the normal topics revolving around sickness and health, we paid much attention to pregnancy, childbirth, contraception, abortion, sexuality and violence against women. I was confronted by a distressing lack of knowledge and so many superstitions around sexuality and reproduction:

- If you jump down three steps on the day of your first menstruation, your subsequent menstruation will only last for three days.
- If you get pregnant and want a son, the man should lie on the right side of the woman after the sexual intercourse.



- You get twins if you eat many twin bananas.

Further, every participant knew a woman in her vicinity who gave birth to a snake, a fish, a frog or even a horse.

"Not so simple to know whether, how far, and how we should confront these 'superstitions' with our Western, 'rational', 'scientific' view."

### Child Labor

September 18. Today's newspaper displays a photograph of the prince and princess of York with their little daughter Beatrice. An approaching visit of Fergie and Andrew to the Philippines? No, it is about the cute dress of the little Beatrice, which was made here. It's probably not marked *Made in the Philippines*. After all, a label does not belong to such an expensive dress. The cloth comes from Indonesia, the lace from France, the thread from Taiwan, and the buttons from Japan. In a little village in Negros, all these are sewn into a dress by girls who are not much older than the sweet little princess.

Child labor is prevalent in the Philippines. The government does not reveal any figures on this, but NGOs have estimated that about 5 million Filipino children under 14 are working. That is one out of four. More than half of them are found in the countryside, as unpaid labor force on the family's small piece of land, on plantations or in a small cottage industry.

In the illegal sweatshops, girls are growing up with the rattling sound of sewing machines. As babies, they play with these threads and when they turn four they carry out their first stitches. A couple of years later they will help mama with sewing after school time, and as soon as they turn twelve, they will remain at home to work full-time.

The seamstresses are paid per piece. They earn no more than 15 to 150 pesos a week, but for many families this already accounts for 30% to 60% of their income. More often, it is thanks to the wage of the older sister that the younger siblings can go to school. Work in the sweatshops is repetitive and intensive. If there is an order to be completed, they also work at night. But there are also months without work, and therefore without income. The small shops are overcrowded, badly lit and ventilated, and noisy. The girls complain of headaches and strained eyes.

The child workers in the cities fare no better. Among them are the 1.5 million Filipino street children. You see them at busy crossroads: selling cigarettes, newspapers or flowers; shining shoes; or keeping guard on parked



cars. Or they walk through the streets with their cart, searching the trashcans to scavenge and sell old papers, empty bottles and scraps of iron. These are the jobs with the highest labor risks: exposure to natural elements and pollution, traffic accidents and street violence.

The children sleep in parks, under the bridges, in empty houses. UNICEF estimates that due to poverty and desperation, about 60,000 Filipino children are forced to sell their own flesh, in the underworld of prostitution, pornography and trafficking in people.

### Cagayan Valley

October 21.. Cagayan Valley, in the northeastern part of Luzon, is one of the areas where one can still find splendid rainforests. It is a heavily militarized area. Almost every village has a military detachment. It is therefore no joke to enter this guerrilla front. It takes us four days of walking, with many a detour through the forest.

Andrea, Lean and I are on our way to a course on guerrilla health care. Ka Mente is accompanying us on this journey. Mente is a veteran of the region. He just arrived from an important party meeting where he was given a higher task in the region known as CAPA, which stands for the provinces of Cagayan Valley and Kalinga-Apayao. A nice guy, Ka Mente, likes to talk in his rather broken Tagalog and hears me out on European and international politics.

Along the way, camping under the open sky. Catching frogs and crabs in a small river and making a fire with damp deadwood to roast this portion of protein and cook some rice. Sleeping on the hammock or close to one another on a raincoat. And in the morning waking up shivering and wearing again those wet muddy socks and shoes for another day of marching.

But now we find ourselves in a hamlet. Here live no more than six Aggay families, one of the many indigenous peoples who live in Northern Luzon. It's been years since Ka Mente has been in this *sitio*. He speaks the local language and is welcomed by the local people as a lost son. Old women open conversations with him to reminisce about the old days. To spend this free time, Lean, Andrea and I, as usual, resort to what we are crazy about: playing cards.

Towards evening, Ka Mente takes us to a small NPA camp nearby. There we meet 12 kasama. They immediately help us spread out our raincoats and hammocks. It's great to relax in the serenity of a guerrilla camp.



## Ka Berly

After the evening meal Ka Mente calls us for a meeting about the health work in the region. Ka Berly gives a report.

She has been here for five years and is, according to Mente, "loved for her cheerful personality". It is an enjoyable meeting. At every point in her presentation, even if it is about problems or failures, Ka Berly would come up with a contagious laugh.

October 22. "Just let me go with Ka Lydia, you'd better rest a little more." With a broad smile that exposes her beautiful set of teeth, Ka Berly takes over a task of her brand new guerrilla husband, Ka Mandy, who is still recovering from an attack of diarrhea. She hurriedly puts her M-16 on her shoulder, waves once more and hurries after Ka Lydia. They will be looking for vegetables in the nearby sitio.

Bewilderment engulfs us upon hearing gunfire just less than ten minutes later. "Pow, pow, popopopow!!!" The danger appears to be nearby. The gunfire is answered: "Pow, pow, pow!!!" Without looking up or around, really nervous, I begin to pack my backpack. "Be calm, don't panic," shouts Ka Mente. "Everybody, pack calmly and gather near the washing area." The composure that a veteran cadre as Ka Mente exudes amid this direct danger gives me the much-needed confidence.

While packing, Lean, Andrea and I exchange thoughts. Everyone realizes that something must have happened to Ka Berly and Ka Lydia. After another brief salvo the shooting stops. We still do not know what is happening, and we can no longer afford to wait. With the medical team and other noncombatants we head towards the stream, and with great effort climb up the steep and slippery rocks. Two teams of NPA fighters stay behind to cover the retreat and to find out what has just happened.

A couple of hours later a group of kasama come over to us. Ka Lydia is with them. She has a gunshot wound in the arm. But where is Berly? With a foreboding of fear we listen to Lydia's story: "When we were at the vegetable farm near the sitio, shots suddenly were fired in our direction from one of the huts. We threw ourselves to the ground, but a bullet caught Ka Berly's left breast. With her undamaged arm the girl shows the route of the bullet. "It went in the direction of her shoulder. Ka Berly admonished me to seek safe refuge, and said that she would take care of herself. She even had the presence of mind to hide her gun under the leaves. Then I retreated."



With the medical staff we discuss what we can possibly do. Ka Lydia has an open wound in her forearm which is easy to treat. But based on her description, Ka Berly's wound is serious, potentially fatal. A medical team should go there as soon as possible to bring the necessary instruments and to perform an operation. Lean and Andrea are already busy searching for the needed materials.

But Ka Mente, who is in command, allows no one to leave. "The situation is very unstable. So long as we don't know where the enemy soldiers are situated and how many they are, we cannot afford to expose more kasama to danger. We have no choice but to retreat. In the thick cover of the woods, we shall await the report of the kasama who are now reconnoitering the area."

The small guerrilla column silently makes its way through the woods. Undoubtedly, in everybody's mind is the thought of Ka Berly, who may be seriously hurt lying in pain somewhere. No one dares to say aloud what everybody knows: chances are that Berly is dead.

The night has already fallen when the members of the reconnoiter mission arrive. In whispers they are talking with Ka Mente. His dejected face already tells that something bad has happened to Ka Berly. Then Mente informs us that the kasama have found her body. The bullet entered her left breast and again came out of her shoulder. It probably pierced through Berly's heart, or at least the main blood vessels just above the heart. She must have died within a few minutes. A heavy silence falls over the forest.

The kasama also learned from the Aggay some news about the military. The night before they had entered their sitio. It seems their arrival was only accidental, for they didn't ask about the NPA. Under the scrutinizing eyes of the soldiers the people found no way of warning the kasama in the camp.

That morning, Ka Berly and Ka Lydia who appeared happily chattering in the vegetable farm startled the unsuspecting soldiers. When the soldiers noticed the girls' M-16s, they immediately opened fire. After the firefight they fled on foot. According to Ka Mente, they must have been as surprised as we, because the enemy was under the delusion that they had already "cleared" this region of NPAs for years.

### **Burying A Kasama...**

October 23.. For Ka Berly's burial all of us move back to the camp. The kasama have brought the body of Ka Berly here. Upon seeing the body, a thick lump lodges in my throat. This is my first direct confrontation with death. It distresses me that the lively, likeable Ka Berly was the one who fell in battle. It is only now that I understand better the guerrilla saying that the martyrs of the



revolution are the best sons and daughters of the people. For the first time I was sharply reminded that commitment to the armed liberation struggle is literally a matter of life and death. I am on the verge of bursting into tears, but seeing how Lean and Andrea, Mente and the other kasama try to remain strong, I suppress my sorrow.

Ka Berly's body is totally covered with mud and blood. Without uttering a word, Lean, Andrea and I begin to clean the body. I let go off my thoughts and let my tears fall freely. The other kasama also weep. A couple of girls dig up their best clothes to dress up Ka Berly. Her hair is carefully washed and combed. The body is then wrapped in the most beautiful *malong* and then laid in a specially braided bamboo mat.

All of us dig Berly's last resting place. Because there are no shovels or even *bolos* we use pot covers and our bare hands. Our powerless rage enables us to carry out the work quickly.

The burial rite itself is short. Carefully, Ka Berly's body is laid in the grave. Ka Mandy, Berly's husband, throws in a small bottle. Inside is a note with Berly's real name and her political history. It is indeed heartbreaking to hear Mandy wail. The man is simply inconsolable. Ka Mente and Ka Lean each say a few words of farewell. Together, we sing a couple of revolutionary songs. We end with the beautiful love song, *Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa*: "Which love is nobler than giving one's life for the Motherland." There is none, there is none." *Anong pag-ibig pa, wala na nga, wala...*

### **The Battle For Marag Valley**

October 24. For half a day, we walk our way to the temporary base of the regional CPP leadership. Two female kasama here, Ka Jon and Ka Badyaw, hold leading positions in CAPA. This region also covers the legendary Marag Valley. Marag Valley was in recent years the laboratory for the infamous counterinsurgency operations of the Philippine armed forces. Here and abroad, the name has come to symbolize the violation of human rights by the Aquino regime. Jon, Badyaw and Mente paint me an accurate picture of the recent history and the present situation of Marag Valley.

Marag Valley lies in the more inhospitable part of Kalinga-Apayao province. From the capital Manila, this place can only be reached after a 15-hour bus ride, four hours on a *banca* and still a couple of hours walking. The place could have been a paradise on earth: virgin rainforests, a very fertile soil and all kinds of mineral deposits. The population consists of no more than a few thousand Isneg and Aggay, peoples who live by subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing.



The Philippine armed forces have sought to justify their all-out attacks on the valley on the pretext that the area was the headquarters of the regional shadow government of the National Democratic Front. The valley is also supposed to have been used for the military training of the NPA. But the real intention is to cleanse the area of any trace of living creatures in order to make fortunes by exploiting the tropical rainforests.

As early as 1985, the local authorities declared the area no-man's land. With one stroke of the pen, the residents of the five Marag villages were scrapped from the civil registry. Because of this, the people there could no longer vote nor pay taxes. The people couldn't care less about this. But not getting any school, clinic, teacher or vaccination from the government is an entirely different matter.

What Marag did get in that same year, and uninvited, was its first army battalion. For the population it was the beginning of a series of indiscriminate shootings, bombings, forced evacuations, extrajudicial killings, cases of rape and torture.

Following President Aquino's declaration of total war in February 1987, the offensive against Marag was carried out via the Oplan Red Buster III. This meant more troops, more vigilantes, more firepower, more terror. To the infamous list of human rights violations, the following were added: the destruction of crops, the scorching of villages, robbery, food and medicine blockades and the use of chemical weapons.

### **Oplan Salidummay**

In October 1990, a bigger counterinsurgency operation codenamed *Oplan Salidummay* was launched, resulting in the total occupation of Marag Valley that lasted for two years. No less than five battalions (about 2,500 troops) were deployed to that tiny valley. More soldiers than inhabitants! A human rights organization recorded for 1991: 147 civilians killed, 74 children died in evacuation centers during a measles epidemic, 88 houses burned and 19 rice warehouses scorched, 3,000 sacks of rice destroyed or left unharvested. Once again, dozens of poor and terrorized Marag families were forced to leave their homes. They sought refuge in Church sanctuaries, as far as Manila.

In the first half of 1992, 13 more civilians were killed (among them three children) by the bullets and bombs fired by the government troops. Entire families were arrested, including a nine-month-old baby. They were presented to the press as rebel surrenderees. A chapel, two small schools and seven houses



were destroyed, dozens of carabaos, pigs and chickens were stolen or killed and 75 hectares of rice could not be harvested.

In September 1992, the Ramos regime announced that “government troops have liberated Marag Valley from NPA control”. A general proudly announced that “there are no more people living in Marag”. And as a last link of the “counterinsurgency” strategy, the establishment of the Marag Valley Development Authority was announced. All of a sudden, there they were: the ministries of agrarian reform, public works, social welfare and health care. With great resources they came to ‘develop’ Marag Valley. For a little valley, neglected for years and now totally destroyed and burned down, 14 million pesos were earmarked for a municipal hall, a police headquarters, road, a school and a clinic.

### **Night Harvest On Revolutionary Fields**

Despite the danger and the deprivation around them, 200 Marag families have chosen to remain. Many of them have had to flee, yes, but in the opposite direction: higher up in the mountains, and deeper into the forest.

With their deeply rooted tradition of self-reliance and self-organization, the Isneg and the Aggay know fully well how to get themselves out of any problem. Their socially organized formations have remained intact. Apart from that, they have united themselves into various cooperatives and committees. The harvest committee organizes collective ‘commando harvests’ after sunset. For being seen on the fields during the day is dangerous, the enemy just does not allow any economic activity. A couple of peasants who once risked to go near a ‘revolutionary ricefield’ were never seen again.

The military do not feel so much safer on the other side of the river. The Marag residents have formed their own people’s militia, which is being supported by the New People’s Army. For the revolutionary movement and the indigenous people are natural allies against a common enemy. Both fight for the same ideal: right to land, survival and decent existence. Together they succeed in patiently decimating the vulnerable military troops. Since October 1990, 168 soldiers have already been killed in these operations.

In a situation where the people are continually confronted with the brute force of the military, armed resistance is for them a matter of course and a necessity. That’s the reason why CPP cadres found it difficult to have the people of Marag and neighboring areas swallow the short-lived cease-fire in 1986-87, during the peace negotiations between the Aguino government and the NDF.



Recruitment for the NPA runs smooth here. "If you can no longer go on with the struggle and if you plan to leave us, well and good, but please leave your weapons behind," the NPA would often hear from many Isneg and Aggay.

### **Celery must be chewed well**

October 25. The food in the camp is monotonous. And I thought that a tropical forest would deliver a rich harvest of fruits and wildgame. But what we have here is *sitaw*, *sitaw* and more *sitaw*: thin, almost tasteless and 30-40-centimeter long string beans. Here in Northern Luzon, the salty bagoong is used generously as a taste enhancer. But I cannot take this terribly salty sauce concocted with small shrimps.

In late afternoon Ka Jon, Ka Badyaw and Ka Mente tell me more about the work of the NPA in the region. Of course, the people's army is doing more than just support the militia of the indigenous residents. It conducts military operations against the military, warlords and private armies of logging companies. The movement has started revolutionary land reform. Concretely, the implementation of the minimum program means that the rent paid by the peasant to the landlord has been reduced from 1/3 of the gross harvest to 1/4 of the net harvest. A substantial difference, greatly benefiting the peasants. And they know fully well to whom they should be grateful: in many cases, the peasants spontaneously share part of the added income with the NPA.

October 27. Medics from other guerrilla fronts in the region begin to arrive. I speak with Ka Giging, who leads the health work of the NPA in a nearby front. Giging is a petite, sharp woman with an inquisitive look and one who wears her heart on her sleeve. Self-educated, Giging is now a full-fledged medic.

She shows her primary handbook: a well-thumbed book, *Health Knowledge*. The book was published in the United States in 1935! It is filled with photos of tidy American families, with edifying captions as 'celery must be chewed well'. I can only hope that Ka Giging has applied this theoretical knowledge to the concrete circumstances of the Filipino guerrilla anno 1992.

October 29. Many kasama in this region are illiterate. The leadership in the camp would like to address that problem by introducing a course that goes beyond reading, writing and arithmetic. Science, social studies and even arts are included in the curriculum. The teacher, a young female comrade who comes from a teachers' union in Manila, explains to me that the objective is to teach within a period of three to six months the primary subjects given in the elementary school and in the four-year secondary school. Considering the motivation and drive of the literacy class, the revolution is once again creating a miracle.



1 November. I have to be back in Manila for the end of my All Saints' Day's leave. Due to the delays brought about by Ka Berly's death I will be missing the medical training.

Andrea and a number of kasama are accompanying me. This time we are taking a shorter route. But for security reasons, the journey should be done at night. After four hours we come out of the forest and find ourselves on the plain. We are no longer allowed to use our flashlights. Under the dim moonlight, Andrea and I slip every now and then from the narrow ridges between the ricefields.

Just when we reach a sandy road Ka Ronald whispers suddenly: "Run!" Without knowing why and in total darkness I begin to run. It is running at full trot, without looking around. I have to concentrate well and focus on the white shoes of the kasama before me to know where I should run. Andrea and I have difficulty keeping up with the pace. After about 20 minutes we finally stop. A kasama explains that we ended up near a CAFGU detachment and that he heard someone there shout. It is possible that we were noticed.

After an hour we reach the house of a sympathizer. Before the crack of dawn Andrea and I are picked up by a motorcycle. At 6 o'clock in the morning we are safe in the bus for the 15-hour trip back to Manila.



## Chapter Seven

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### The Year of the Rooster 1993

#### Joma Sison's Fax War

December 1992. Despite the approval of the *Reaffirm* document by the Plenum of the CPP Central Committee in July, rumors about differences of opinion within the national-democratic movement continue to circulate. It does not take long before this is leaked to the media, with name and surname. Within the ranks of the progressives there is but one topic: the “debate”.

December 7. In a faxed interview with the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the major Philippine newspaper, Jose Maria Sison says he does not know anything about a so-called split in the NDF. He attributes these stories to the psychological warfare of the Ramos regime, which uses agents to sow intrigue and plant false articles in the press against the NDF and the CPP. The newspaper announces that 20 former members of the CPP Central Committee, who were not present at the Plenum, have started a petition campaign.

December 10. International Human Rights Day, but this year the most talked about topic is the *Inquirer* headline: “Split in the CPP confirmed; peace negotiations in danger”! Jose Maria Sison, named by the newspaper as “the controversial chair of the CPP”, has faxed another message. It is a bombshell: “Ricardo Reyes, Romulo Kintanar and Benjamin de Vera are being used by the military for intelligence work and psychological warfare.” Reyes is the alleged former secretary-general of the CPP; Kintanar the former chief of staff of the NPA; and De Vera the former head of the Party’s Mindanao Commission. The three were recently released as political prisoners. According to Sison, they are “the most accountable for the most serious errors of the CPP. They are also the most bitter opponents of the educational rectification campaign of the CPP.”

Sison also declares that “President Ramos does not want to end the armed conflict through peace negotiations, but by weakening the revolutionary movement and forcing it to surrender. This is the kind of negotiations that led to the capitulation of the armed struggle in El Salvador.”

Human Rights Day is celebrated by the Medical Action Group with a conference and a solidarity meal, which I attend. There, too, in whispers, Joma Sison’s fax messages are the dominant topic of the day. Our UG friend, Ella, sits inconspicuously among the audience. Later, she talks to me and frankly



expresses her displeasure over Joma's actions. I don't know what to think about it. A split in the movement would be disastrous, and is Joma not provoking that with his public and seemingly unfounded accusations?

December 11. Joma responds to an *Inquirer* article. "There is no split in the CPP, the Central Committee continues to carry out its task and enjoys the full support of Party members."

December 12. In a press conference, Kintanar, Reyes and De Vera deny all of Joma's accusations. "In more than two decades, we have dedicated ourselves to the service of national liberation and democracy. That speaks for itself." Satur Ocampo, the generally respected former principal peace negotiator of the NDF, speaks of a "debate between people who are outside of the Party", for the three have never been re-integrated in the movement since their release. "Granted that they still want reintegration," he subtly adds.

December 15. Ramos claims that "the Communist rebellion is self-destructing. In the whole world we see the phenomenon of the fall of Communism. Now we are experiencing the local version of it."

December 17. "Don't count us out yet," says Joma in the *Inquirer*. "Ramos is dreaming, and the attempt to destroy the movement has been stopped precisely because Reyes, De Vera and Kintanar have been unmasked." He adds that the CPP is no revisionist party like the ones in the Soviet Union and East Europe, which degenerated and finally disappeared, but a Marxist-Leninist Party.

December 27. The CPP faxes its anniversary statement to the press. It says that the decisions of the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee will be fully implemented, the most important of which is an urgent rectification campaign against the serious ideological, political and organizational errors that have led to a heavy setback and serious losses for the Party.

On the same day I write to Hilde Vanobberghen:

"The problems in the movement fill us with tension. It seems to me Joma is over-optimistic. I think that it is correct to say that the great majority of the movement would eventually accept the rectification, fortunately enough. I have pored through the final version of *Reaffirm* that Lean gave us. The 64-page English version has become 88 pages in Tagalog, with more examples, explanations, details and, here and there, some sharp edges smoothened out.

"But almost everyone here thinks, even those who are on the *Reaffirm* side, that it is inappropriate for Joma to wash dirty linen in public and to carry out a



fax war. I have heard only one person so far who thinks that Joma's action is justified, that there was no other way to alarm the movement about the serious problems than via the media."

## Year of the Rooster

What has the Year of the Rooster, which says *taktalaok* in Tagalog and not *kukelukuu* as in Dutch, to offer to the Philippines in 1993? Because the rooster finds its food on the most barren ground, Chinese astrologers predict that this will be a bumper year for agriculture. It's about time. After years of natural disasters and drought, this fertile country is even forced to import its staple food, rice.

Less pleasing is the prediction that this will also be a good year for the military. The word *hanig* (macho, quarrelsome) means to them more human rights violations, as has been noted in the first half of 1992: 468 illegal arrests, 15 disappearances, 40 extrajudicial killings, 174 cases of mishandling or torture, 27 forced evacuations of civilian population. Military operations have resulted in 1.2 million internal refugees, refugees in their own country. And what will the Year of the Rooster bring to the people's movement?

January 4, 1993. The Alex Boncayao Brigade, the urban guerrilla unit of the NPA in Manila, refuses to dismantle itself and go to the countryside, as ordered by the CPP leadership. "Popoy", who leads the CPP commission in Manila and therefore also the ABB, bluffs that his 5,000 people unanimously reject the 10th Plenum.

January 5. A report of the intelligence service gives out names of CPP leaders who belong to the "Sison fundamentalists, who cling to the Maoist strategy of protracted people's war", and to the "revisionist military adventurers identified with Kintanar, who favor more urban guerrilla and mass actions."

January 8. Sison adds two names to the list of splittists: Carlos Forte or "Popoy" (real name Filemon Lagman, CPP-Manila) and Victor del Mar (Arturo Tabara, CPP Visayas).

January 15. The Wahington Post writes: "Despite their historic isolation, the Filipino communists have been caught by the fall of communism in the Soviet bloc." The American quality paper asserts that Sison is leading a comfortable life in the Netherlands. "He is said to have discovered in a Dutch disco a new dance step, called the 'proletarian shuffle'!"



### What Do Ric Reyes And Popoy Stand For?

January 19. Ricardo Reyes declares in an interview with the *Manila Chronicle* that there is a big possibility that a "new Left formation" will be founded soon, which could unite with existing legal organizations. He reveals that a bloc of reformers in the Party has existed since 1988, striving for a revision of the revolutionary theory and strategy, in the light of the 'people's power' that overthrew dictator Marcos in February 1986.

January 24. Lean drops by every now and then. Of course, we talk about the big row. I write to Hilde:

"The real influence and following of the splittists is relatively limited and does not correspond to the big media attention they get. Ric Reyes is the most important. In all the places that encountered problems in the past years, it was Ric Reyes who was responsible. He was in the leadership of the Mindanao Commission during the bloody campaign against suspected infiltrators. He was also the chief editor of the Party paper *Ang Bayan*, when a laudatory article for Gorbachov was written.

"The man complains about the lack of democracy in the Party, while in fact the real problem was the prevalence of ultra-democracy, of liberalism. Had Reyes been consistent enough with his flagrantly reformist ideas, he should have left the Party a long time ago, instead of misusing its resources and prestige against the revolution.

"The other known dissident, Popoy of the Manila region, already refused to adopt the boycott policy of the Party in the parliamentary elections of 1978, at the height of the Marcos dictatorship. He was then transferred to Northern Luzon, but after a couple of years he was rehabilitated to his former position.

"The errors that his armed group, the ABB, is accused of are no trivial matters: militarism, adventurism, financial opportunism and cooperation with criminal syndicates. Note that those who committed the biggest errors, make the most noise against *Reaffirm* and the rectification. Popoy forbids his followers from reading or discussing the official Party documents. Talk about democracy!"

### In The Slum Areas Of Apelo Cruz

January 28. Rita writes about her work with Gabriela:

In two slum areas of Manila, our Commission for Women and Health has pilot projects to train health workers who run a small health center. One project



is in Letre, a large slum community in the northern part of the city. In the whole district, with 26,000 families, the state has not a single health center.

The second district, Apelo Cruz 704, Pasay City, Metro Manila, lies in the vicinity of the airport, in the southern part of the city. It sounds like the address of a successful Chinese merchant. But the neighborhood does not look exclusive at all, just a hundred meters from a busy bus station of the circumferential road EDSA.

The place buzzes with activity. Passengers who have to wait long for the bus to leave, and others, exhausted and famished, who arrive in the city after a long travel. The buses with pitch-black fumes come and go. Rickety taxis crowd each other, and the better-organized tricycles are patiently waiting for their turn. And then there are the hawkers. Some are peddling their wares, the others tending more or less permanent stalls. For sale: fruits, vegetables, ready-to-eat food, drinks, cookies, candies, even toys, toilet articles, shoelaces and lighters. And at night: women and girls, worth 30 to 40 pesos per session.

Apelo Cruz number 704 stands along the Pasig River, an open sewage rather. Behind this single house number hides an entire slum district, a fallow area that is home to 600 squatter families. Rows of shanties, made of corrugated sheets, wood, carton and plastic lean against each other. You slip into the area by passing through a narrow entrance. The shanties are so close to each other and knocked together that sunlight hardly comes in. One has to watch out for the wash basins filled with laundry and for the roosters that are everywhere, tied at their claws with a thin rope. Lots of people: men in shorts and bare from the waist up, women washing themselves or doing the laundry, children playing.

You can look into every little house through the open doors. A residence consists mostly of just one room, the size of a few square meters. There is hardly any privacy here. Everybody knows, hears and sees everybody; gossips and quarrels are in abundance. Most of the residents of Apelo have a small television set that, together with a pair of light bulbs, is illegally connected to the electrical grid. The TV is their window to a fantasy world of prosperity and wellbeing, the reverse image of the reality in Apelo.

House number 704 has only one connection to the water system, and has two faucets. A total of 600 families come here for their water provisions, with pails and jerrycans. To avoid so much dragging, the people wash their clothes near the faucets in the open air.

Most of the houses in Apelo have no toilets. Given the lack of space, you would of course not set aside a separate room that would be used for just a couple of times a day! By the way, drainage and sewage are also non-existent.



The call of nature is heeded in a can or in a plastic bag that goes with the house trash. That means in the river, for there is, of course, no garbage collection here.

Except for selective garbage collection that is the source of livelihood of Apelo. Most men, and also women and many children, are professional garbage pickers and sorters. On the streets and house-to-house, they collect paper, empty bottles and crates. In Apelo, they are neatly sorted in big sacks, which are sold to middlemen.

### **A Course For Women**

February 2. At Rita's office a medical course is being launched for the women of Apelo Cruz. Rita notes:

"By means of a drawing, the women are asked to introduce themselves. Christina draws herself, her husband, her six children and a small dwelling. Diffidently, she says that the house does not look its best, "but maybe it's because I'm not good at drawing".

"Filomena draws no house. She and her five children have been living in a pushcart since her husband left them. In the morning she works in the small community clinic of the women's organization; in the afternoon she washes other people's clothes to earn a living, and at 4:00 p.m. she begins to tread the streets of Manila with the pushcart, in search of recyclable garbage. She brings along her two boys, in between the garbage, for no one will take care of them. At night, Filomena puts some carton in the cart, spreads a sheet over it, and that is how they sleep.

"In the course, we try to make the discussion of medical topics as clear and interesting as possible: a smoking bottle to illustrate the effects of cigarettes on the lungs; a bicycle tire filled with water and some planks of wood to demonstrate the workings of the blood pressure apparatus; a true-blooded gay to discuss the situation of homosexuals; and a role-playing to understand the symptoms of the most common diseases."

### **With The Rejects**

February 10. I am attending today one of the infamous group discussions of the Rejects. Rejects is the term used to describe those who reject the *Reaffirm* analysis. The office of Luisa, our Dutch nun friend, serves as one of the main headquarters of the Rejects. A discussion of the "debate" takes place and I invite myself. The speaker is no less than Joel Rocamora, with Ric Reyes, the intellectual guru of the dissidents.



I notice that all those present are insiders. One can assume that everyone here is at least a member of an NDF organization and has already read the *Reaffirm* document. Personal attacks, ridicules, rumors, half-truths and utter lies characterize Rocamora's tirade. Rocamora makes stupid wordplay over "fax attacks", "Sison's greetings (instead of "season's greetings"), "washing his dirty Lenin" (instead of his dirty linen).

"Furtively, in the back of his mind, CPP chairman Armando Liwanag does not think that the revolution has three weapons--the party, the people's army and the united front--but four. The fourth weapon is a great leader, like himself." Rocamora also echoes the military propaganda that Armando Liwanag and political asylum seeker Jose Maria Sison are one and the same person. "But I will never say that in public," he adds.

Rocamora defends the factionalists vigorously. "They have good intentions. They try hard not to cause any split. At the moment, they are only organizing discussion and training sessions within their respective units." Nevertheless, this discussion itself is proof that the Rejects are carrying out the discussions outside of their own units.

Rocamora advises the 'opposition' to come out more fiercely and force a total schism. "They have to draw up an alternative platform, an exact opposite of the direction that *Reaffirm* prescribes. Organizationally, we have to have two separate entities, co-existing with one another and with a delineation of turfs, including regions. That way, each one is given free rein in working for his own projects and in trying to validate his strategy and tactics in practice."

I pose a question to Rocamora: "If the opposition agrees that there is a serious decline in the mass base of the revolution but rejects the analysis made by *Reaffirm*, to what do they ascribe this negative trend then?"

"In one word: dogmatism. One example is not seeing or seizing the opportunities offered by the transition from the Marcos dictatorship to the Aquino regime. Furthermore, the national leadership is weak, it has insufficient grasp of the situation. And finally, the anti-infiltration campaigns have caused much damage, not only in Mindanao."

Compared with the depth of *Reaffirm*, I consider that answer too weak and incoherent an analysis of years of major errors and decline.

February 25. Just had another discussion with Lean about the rift in the movement and the "fax war". The prevailing opinion now is that Joma indeed had every right to do this, because he had been personally attacked by the Rejects in different newspapers.



More importantly, the dissidents had really been active in an orchestrated counterrevolutionary campaign, of which the CPP leadership in the Philippines was not aware. In that period, the communication lines with the central leadership, located in a remote guerrilla front, had been cut because of enemy military operations.

In October-November, dozens of articles and documents of the Rejects managed to circulate inside and outside the movement. With NGO funds, the articles were printed in book form and used in meetings. For two crucial months, the Party leadership had not been able to respond to the attacks and lies. Through Joma's faxes the entire national-democratic movement was alerted and the seriousness of the situation became clear to everyone.

### **Brownouts**

March 10. Brownouts or power disruptions have become daily occurrences. They last for a couple of hours, usually 6, often 8, and sometimes 11 hours per day and they can happen anytime.

The jeepney ride to the office has become more tedious than ever. Traffic lights are not working, and the Philippine driving style and the absence of traffic policemen create miserable traffic jams. The CHD office is an oven, since it is part of a building designed to have permanent airconditioning. Photocopying has to wait, a fax message of my sister-in-law cannot come through, and the computers don't work.

The reason behind so much calamity: because of mismanagement and corruption, the country's electric power stations are in a dreadful condition. They break down continuously. For a number of energy projects, a substantial percentage of commissions has ended up in the pockets of politicians. The World Bank is now planning to develop the energy sector. But first, the International Monetary Fund has to be sent in to impose conditions. The IMF and the Japanese Import-Export Bank will release the money only if the Philippine parliament and the Supreme Court agree to a considerable hike of electricity rates.

Rumors circulate that these brownouts are intentionally prolonged for the benefit of the businessmen who are making a killing in selling power generators. Aiming to soften public protest against price hikes, or even preparing to declare martial law, Ramos has decided to grant himself full powers to supposedly solve the energy crisis.

But brownouts also have their advantages. These are quiet moments, without the radio, TV and karaoke of the neighbors. Brownouts are also a



favorite conversation topic, just like the weather. And when the power comes unexpectedly after five instead of six hours, the whole neighborhood jumps for joy, radios and electric fans are turned on and morale rises: alive again!

March 14. Hurrah, we are pregnant again. If everything goes well, we will have our third child in October. Which will complete our family.

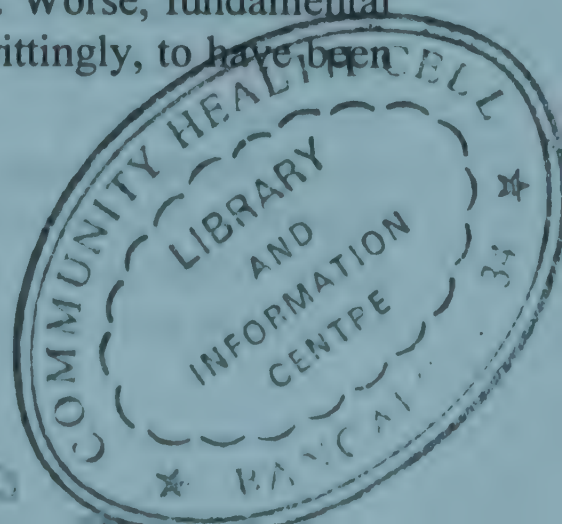
### **An open letter to the solidarity movement**

April 10 1993. A couple of our Belgian-Dutch friends are on the side of the dissidents. Roger has turned away from the KMU and Sister Luisa from Gabriela. They are close buddies of Joel Rocamora. Roger goes to Belgium for a vacation. We fear that he will present a very misleading picture of the debate in the European solidarity movement. Hilde Vanobberghen and our friends in the NDF in Utrecht keep us abreast of the situation there. The last issue of the Bulletin, published by the Filipijnengroep Nederland (FGN, Philippine Group Netherlands), contains a long diatribe against the *Reaffirm* document. As one who is closely involved in the Philippine revolutionary movement, I itch to give them a good trashing. After consulting with a number of progressive development workers, I start to write.

*"For a lasting and fundamental solidarity with the Filipino people's struggle"*

The European solidarity movement for the Philippines is in crisis. Some groups and committees have become passive, others have had their membership reduced or have even been dissolved. A similarly disturbing phenomenon can be observed in other Third World solidarity movements. This decline is largely due to the impact of some remarkable political, economic and social world events that have occurred over the past few years: the 'collapse of socialism' in Eastern Europe, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the negotiated 'peace' to which several liberation movements have succumbed, and the rise of neo-liberalism and the extreme Right in Europe.

But for the specific case of Philippine solidarity work, there is yet another explanation. Under the guise of 'critical solidarity', many solidarity groups have engaged in sterile discussions and guesswork about the internal debates and problems of the Philippine national democratic movement. Worse, fundamental solidarity with the Filipino people seems, wittingly or unwittingly, to have been set aside.



COM H 300



*Which orientation for solidarity work?*

Lately, non-governmental funding agencies have been harping a lot about sustainable development, gender sensitivity, popular education, and the like. In many cases the Philippine solidarity groups have jumped on the bandwagon of these recent trends. Of course there is nothing wrong with showing concern for the environment or for women's rights. But these fashionable terms are often taken out of context, threatening to relegate to the background the more fundamental demands of the Filipino people.

For those nice terms are largely irrelevant to the Filipino workers, peasants, internal refugees, cultural minorities and urban poor, they who are directly confronted with the daily reality of exploitation, oppression and violent repression. Ask what their priorities are, and you may hear: "Land, jobs, shelter, schools, health care. And arms!"

Because, lest we forget, the Philippines is still an underdeveloped and agrarian Third World country, in the grip of foreign interests and local elites. Or, to put it more scientifically, the basic problems of Philippine society are still imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism. Thus, the task that the national democratic movement has set itself remains as valid as ever: to lead the Filipino people in their struggle to throw off this triple yoke.

*The internal debate in a nutshell*

Dissidents within and outside the movement tend to complain a lot about the form in which the internal debate is being conducted, thereby wittingly or unwittingly losing sight of the much more important content. For purposes of clarification a short description follows:

The debate within the CPP, the NDF and the entire national democratic movement is not new; it has been going on for the last 10 years or so. During all those years, everyone could have his own ideas about the most diverse subjects, such as the strategy of popular uprisings versus protracted people's war; the 1986 election boycott error; the characterization of the Aquino regime; the peace talks; the analysis of Philippine society; the role of elections; and the events in Eastern Europe. Also due to certain shortcomings of the central leadership, diverse dissident ideas and theories were allowed to freely develop within the movement, and all sorts of experiments were tolerated for years.

Precisely during that period a serious decline in strength and impact of the revolution was noticed, with an alarming reduction in mass base on a nationwide scale. When scores of reports from the regions and from all sectors of the movement were analyzed on a deeper, theoretical level, the link between, on the



one hand, the serious setbacks in the field and, on the other, the explosion of theoretical deviations and alternative practices, became increasingly clear.

The list of serious deviations that were identified is dizzying. First, there are the "Left" errors: militarism, insurrectionism, bureaucratism, hysteria in the anti-infiltration campaigns, and even outright gangsterism. Then there are the Right deviations: ultra-democracy, electoralism, populism, exaggerated expectations regarding peace negotiations, a too broad and watered-down concept of the NDF, and mistaken praise for Gorbachov.

The bottom line of ten years of confusion: the movement had distanced itself from the masses, from the very people with whom and for whom the revolution is being waged. Because of this, the solution was obvious: back to basics. Back to the strategy, tactics and working methods that had served the movement so well. Back to the grassroots, too, to the masses, the water in which the fish thrives so well.

This process, called rectification in the jargon, started in fact even before the contested CPP document *Reaffirm* was ever conceived. For in most regions the disastrous results of the many errors came to light earlier, and there the decision had been made to change course. Starting 1990, the national leadership had begun discarding the erroneous orientations. Hence, *Reaffirm* and the rectification campaign are but the systematization, deepening and generalization of an analysis and a process that had been going on for several years already.

### *A new challenge to the solidarity movement*

We think the groups involved in solidarity work with the Filipino people should conduct a critical self-examination. For we have the impression that the solidarity movement is to a certain degree influenced by the rightist errors committed by the national-democratic movement.

Borrowing from a popular Philippine TV program, we would like to shout: "Hoy! Gising!" Hey, Wake up! Should the European solidarity movement still want to have genuine solidarity with the Filipino people, then they have to get their act together. They should especially listen to Filipinos whose feet are firmly on the ground and rooted in the struggle.

Abandoning the Filipino people's struggle now is utterly ill-timed, in a period of continuing and intense total war, psychological warfare regarding peace and amnesty, the militarization of the Ramos regime, and a drastic change in the international situation.



It is high time that the real friends of the Filipino people stand up and, with might and main, support the national-democratic liberation struggle."

I sign with the name Chris Devon, Concerned Development Workers in the Philippines, and send the letter to around thirty Philippine solidarity groups in Europe.

### **Protest Against Maternal Mortality**

May 28. Today is International Protest Day for Women and Health. Gabriela is taking part. For this protest action we are mounting a burial, to commemorate all women who died unnecessarily during pregnancy or delivery.

In the Philippines these are 2,000 women every year, 97 percent of whom are in the slum areas. The most important direct causes of their deaths are hemorrhage, infections and complications of high blood pressure. Ninety-four percent of this maternal mortality is preventable, for in Belgium these health problems do not usually lead to death.

But it is more than a question of blood banks, antibiotics or blood pressure sets. The entire Philippine health care is in a lamentable situation, as are prenatal and postnatal care. Future mothers hardly avail of prenatal care. Going to a private doctor means spending a lot of money while you are not even sick. At a government clinic, where you can get free consultations, you are snarled up ("Pregnant again?" "Why are you so late for your check-up?"). Besides, you have to cue for hours and there is a lack of qualified personnel, medical instruments and medicines.

Many women are suffering from anemia or malnutrition. They get too many children, too quick one after the other and at too young or too advanced an age. Due to a low level of schooling and strict Catholic morals, good contraception is hardly applied, with the consequence that many women feel forced to have abortions.

But because abortion is officially forbidden, women take things into their own hands, using various means: inserting a carrot into the vagina, drinking bitter plant extracts, doing strenuous physical activities or gobbling up 12 aspirin tablets and three bottles of coke. A woman can also go to a hilot, an unregistered midwife, who tries to do it by massaging the womb, using herbs or a catheter. Because of its illegal character, it is difficult to ascertain the total number of abortions. The figures vary from 75,000 to 150,000 cases per year. And a badly performed abortion is an important cause of maternal mortality.



This morning we discuss the problem of maternal mortality with Health Secretary Flavier. He has only 15 minutes to spare us. Yes, he is aware of the problem. But what can he do about it? Everything is very complex... the system... the politicians... the Church... the limited means....

In the afternoon, with about 200 Gabriela women we march through the city, with streamers, whistles and bells. In front of the Philippine General Hospital, the biggest state hospital, we lay a funeral wreath. Around it we light candles. The rite is led by a woman in the role of a *babaylan*, a high priestess of the pre-colonial period.

### Vaccination And Militarization

Ramos' Health Secretary, Juan Flavier, is a popular figure. He has worked as a countryside doctor for 32 years and has written three books about his experience there, using snappy parables and anecdotes. He has stood for years as head of a big NGO, the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction.

Secretary Flavier stands as a model for the so-called new approach of President Ramos: people empowerment, sustainable development, participatory democracy. Concepts that, in the not-too-distant past, were still considered subversive by Ramos himself, when, under dictator Marcos, he headed the forces of repression.

At the top of Flavier's program of action are the National Vaccination Days. These campaigns are conducted simultaneously with another program, the so-called Ceasefire for Children, during which "only vaccines shall be shot, not bullets." An empty propaganda slogan that makes no sense, for it is not the armed conflict that causes the spread of children's diseases or obstructs the fight against these diseases. It is the abominable social and economic situation and the inadequacy of the health services.

The military analogy that Flavier uses--the vaccination campaign is also called Oplan Alis Disease, Operational Plan Away with Disease--is misplaced. A progressive health worker, who has had to deal several times with Ramos' soldiers in his village, asks: "More children die through militarization than through polio. If the secretary is so concerned about the welfare of the children, why doesn't he lead a campaign against militarization?"

But on that matter Flavier keeps completely silent, just as on the debt problem, landlordism, unemployment, the price increases. The Council for Health and Development brands Flavier's populist health projects as sugarcoating for Ramos' unpopular political and economic measures. Or even worse, as a component of his counterinsurgency campaign. For the local health



organizations in the various provinces report to CHD that well-armed soldiers accompany vaccination teams to far-flung villages, where they eagerly note down the names of all adolescent youth. But, after the vaccination days, Secretary Flavier proclaims that "health is neutral and does not know any ideology..."

Another project of the Department of Health is the *Super Sangkap Laban sa Hirap*, or the Super Factor against Poverty. Iodine capsules are given away to remedy goiter and mental retardation. As if this would also remedy poverty. Furthermore, there is the *Oplan Sagip-Mata*, Save the Eyes. Vitamin A capsules are distributed to children in order to prevent an eye illness caused by a lack of Vitamin A. The capsules are donated by the American government's development organization, USAID.

Flavier's health projects are highly commercialized. His vaccination campaigns are sponsored by the Filipino fastfood chain Jollibee. Thus, along with immunity against children's diseases, bad eating habits are cultivated. Not wanting to be left behind, McDonald's sponsors the Month of the Heart of the Department of Health. While consuming a tasty hamburger and caffeine-filled coke, the customers can have their blood pressure taken free of charge.

And there are the acronyms that Flavier makes use of. A completely vaccinated area is declared a Fully-Vaccinated Region, or FVR, the initials of President Fidel V. Ramos. He still has another FVR-project: Fortified Vitamin Rice. And even a FIDEL: Fortified Iodine Deficiency Elimination. That's the same as in earlier times: MARCOS (Medical Assistance to Rural Communities and Other Sectors) and IMELDA (Integrated Medical Expeditions to Less Developed Areas). But we can also do it. Rita and I are planning to set up private projects under the names BERT (Belgian Expeditions to the Rural Tropics) and RITA (Research Initiatives for Training and Assistance).

### **Hoechst Versus Romy Quijano**

Nestlé, McDonald's, the pharmaceutical business: the Philippines is a favorite hunting ground for transnational corporations. In their insatiable hunt for maximum profits, they do not want the slightest obstacle to be put in their way. Our friend Romy Quijano knows that fully well. Romy is a pharmacist, university professor, chair of the Health Alliance for Democracy, an organization of progressive health workers, and adviser to the Council for Health and Development. In a newspaper interview he said that Thiodan, a widely used pesticide produced by the German chemical giant Hoechst, could potentially cause cancer. Immediately, Hoechst filed a case against him, asking for a 22 million peso damage claim.



Thiodan (generic name: endosulfan) is classified by the World Health Organization under the "moderately harmful" pesticides. The Philippine Department of Agriculture had once banned the product in 1992, but Hoechst succeeded in having the law repealed through court procedures.

Hoechst's juridical steps are accompanied by a deceptive advertising campaign: "Hoechst, for a better life". A better life for the company indeed, but not for the rice farmers, whose lives are seriously threatened by pesticides. Every year, thousands of cases of poisoning from pesticides are noted in Central Luzon, the rice granary of the Philippines. Farmers exposed to pesticides for years can have problems with their blood, liver, kidney, respiratory organs, skin, eyes and nervous system. But Hoechst couldn't care less.

## The Split

July 16. The CPP-Manila, under Popoy's leadership, declares its autonomy from the CPP central leadership. He says that his group is still for armed struggle, but is ready to "use all possibilities offered by bourgeois democracy" and "to make use of even the slightest possibility to seek a peaceful negotiated solution to the armed conflict".

At the same time, he threatens to intensify the attacks of the urban guerrillas on policemen, criminals and businessmen. The Alex Boncayao Brigade shall hand the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission a list of 1,000 hardened criminals that it can liquidate, says Popoy. Ramos responds dryly, saying that his police forces can take care of that job.

July 18. An anonymous CPP cadre in Manila says that the factionalist Popoy group is responsible for the burning of buses during the *welgang bayan* of 1990 and for a series of bomb attacks in 1991, which caused innocent casualties. He warns that Popoy has a two-year plan to intensify urban terrorism.

July 21. I write Rita's sister Hilde:

"The debate and the 'split' have also influenced friendships. Roger hardly talks to Rita and me; he avoids us completely. We try in vain to deal with him in a normal way. We think that political differences, even serious ones, need not stand in the way of normal human relations. But apparently Roger thinks otherwise.

"I have once again been to Mindanao to give a CHD training. I always find that enjoyable. Another one will follow soon. But right now, I have mostly paper work: project proposals, reports, writing articles, etc.



"Now that our side is being accused by the RJs of 'Stalinism', it is good that you have sent us English books and articles on the Stalin period. Through Lean I sent them to our Filipino comrades. It appears that the translations and documents fall on fertile soil, because I am being requested to give a UG education on political economy and on Ludo Martens' book *The USSR and the Velvet Counterrevolution*. All in all, I have an exciting and varied job. I think that I have learned so much in the process.

"Rita, too, is very busy during these last few months with medical trainings and guidance of the women's organizations in the slum areas.

"Concerning our future in Belgium, we will have to thoroughly discuss this sometime next year, for you apparently have the misconception that we are going back shortly! We did decide, after all, to stay one more year and a half, until the spring of 1995."

### **Philippines 2000**

July 27. In his State of the Nation address, Ramos talks almost exclusively about his Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP), also called 'Philippines 2000', which he launched in January. It is an ambitious five-year economic plan (1993-1998), which is supposed to lay the basis to transform the Philippines into an NIC, a newly industrializing country, by the year 2000. To achieve that, the gross national product must grow annually by 7.5 percent and 1.2 million jobs have to be created every year. If everything goes well, the poverty figure should then drop to 'only' 30 percent of the population by the year 1998.

The main concepts of Philippines 2000 are: competitiveness in the world market, promotion of exports, and the attraction of foreign investments. The instruments needed to achieve that are liberalization or opening up the economy, privatization of state enterprises and services, deregulation or the removal of "bureaucratic hindrances".

The plan is couched in progressive terminology: "quality of life", "people empowerment", "human resources development", "sustainable development". But nice words cannot cover up the fact that Ramos' plan is nothing else than the continuation, under another name, of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) prescribed by the IMF and the World Bank.

Since 1961, Manila has already implemented 20 IMF programs (although not all were called SAPs) with the supposed aim of developing the economy. But after all these IMF interventions, the only thing that grows in the Philippine economy is the foreign debt! Upon the fall of Marcos in 1986 it amounted to



26.3 billion US dollars. Today, after years of paying billions, it stands at 34.1 billion US dollars. And things are getting worse. According to a confidential report of the World Bank, the country has to cough up another 20 billion dollars for debt servicing in the next five years and yet the foreign debt is expected to increase to 40 billion dollars.

Dictator Marcos and his successors, Aquino and Ramos, have always slavishly paid off all the debts of the Philippines to foreign banks, even those whose fraudulent character has been proven. The Philippine Minister of Foreign Affairs Romulo admits publicly that the foreign debt hangs "like a millstone on the neck" of his country, but in the same breath he reiterates that the government shall nicely pay back the debt.

The people's movement sharply criticizes Ramos' Philippines 2000. The peasant association KMP estimates that about 118,000 hectares of agricultural land would be transformed into agro-industrial processing zones and golf courses. The people's organizations also predict that Philippines 2000 would bring with it massive human rights violations; forced evacuation of peasants and indigenous peoples; super-exploitation of workers; pollution of the land, sea and air; food insecurity; militarization; cutting down of social services; and higher taxes.

## Our Little Filipinos

August 7. Yuri comes home from school excitedly: "Papa, there was something itchy when I pooped; something crawled out, and Ate Nene says that it was a bulate, a worm!" The boy then laughs heartily. We don't find that funny at all. We give both our kids anti-worm medicine, but aside from that one long ringworm from Yuri nothing comes out for the time being. Nevertheless, we bring Mara's stool specimen to the laboratory. For weeks she has been suffering from diarrhea. It appears to be amoebiasis, a troublesome intestinal parasite.

Over lunch Rita and I hold a discussion on the name of our third baby. Yuri does not understand our indecision: for a girl, Yasmin, the beautiful princess from the Disney film Aladdin, and for a boy, Jaffar, the evil magician from the same film which is Yuri's great favorite. The Disney rage in Manila is overwhelming. Yuri is not immune to it. Also in that sense our children are full-fledged Filipinos.

## Row Within The People's Organizations

August-September. The debate in the underground national-democratic movement spills over to the legal people's organizations. A trying and confusing period for all those involved in the Philippine struggle.



First on the line is the peasant association KMP. Conflicting views on the strategy to be followed appear to be irreconcilable. The maneuverings are becoming rough. At stake are, among others, the foreign development funds. The KMP National Council decides by a majority vote to depose Chairman Jimmy Tadeo and a few others from their positions. The latter decides to form a rival organization, the "Democratic KMP".

In the KMU, leaders of the Manila department are relegated to a minority position concerning a number of political and organizational questions. They are removed from their positions by the KMU National Council. Some time later, they announce their resignation from the KMU. On September 14 they set up an anti-KMU trade union, the *Bukluran ng Manggawang Pilipino* (BMP, Association of Filipino Workers) and suddenly accuse the KMU leadership of corruption. The same scenario happens in the alliance BAYAN, where the Manila section bolts from the national organization.

## Pina

September 20. Today is Friday and I am on my way to Apelo Cruz. The health workers are holding their weekly meeting. After some discussion I decide to visit a few patients. I have also arranged for an appointment with Pina for an interview. She's one of Apelo's most active health workers and I want to have her story published in our newsletter.

I meet with Pina in the small community clinic. She has just had her wavy hair cut. Having lost weight she looks much younger but more frail. We look for a place where we can talk quietly. There's not much choice, so we set ourselves at the end of the examination table. Our talk is interrupted a few times by arriving patients or pregnant women who drop by for prenatal consultations.

Pina is nervous. "What do you want to know about me?"

"Just start from the very beginning: who are you and where do you come from?"

"My name is Josefina Rodil Ricohermoso, but everyone calls me Pina. I was born in 1959 in Marinduque, an island south of Manila. I am 34 years old now. My father died when I was barely six months old. My mother had to raise me and my five elder brothers and sisters all by herself. We lived in the countryside; our closest neighbor lived one kilometer away. The whole family tilled the land; we planted rice, cassava, corn and some vegetables. We never suffered from hunger, but there was not much money to buy clothes, furniture, or even some meat.



"When I turned seven I was allowed to go to the village school. I finished six years of elementary school, but had to stop studying because there was only one high school and it was in the city. For a teenager, who was also the youngest, there was not much to do in the village. So I decided to join a girlfriend who was working in Manila as a saleswoman at a bakery. I earned barely 40 pesos a month plus food and accommodations. But my mother worried a lot and she came to take me back.

"Mother taught me how to sew and I found work again in Manila. First in a small shop where they paid us per piece: 4.50 pesos for a pair of pants, which was equivalent to one to two hours' work. Later, in a big textile factory, I had a week's wage of 108 pesos. But I had to pay 100 pesos monthly for a small room.

"Although I was almost 20 years old, I did not go out much. Thus I could save, in case I would be dismissed. At that time I got to know my future husband. He was renting a room in the boarding house near mine and had a job in a quarry. After living together for four years we got married. It was a mere civil wedding, no mass or celebration. Mother was angry with me for marrying too young.

"In 1983 I resigned, for I had had two children in the meantime. With only one salary it was difficult to make both ends meet. Hence, my husband decided to try his luck abroad. He found a job as a contract worker in Iraq. From the 10,000 pesos he earned per month, he would send me 3,500 pesos. A big part went to the employment agency that arranged for his visa and plane ticket. During the time when my husband was away, I went to the province with my children. After just one year, my husband had to return because of the war between Iran and Iraq.

"With his separation pay and some of my savings, my husband again registered himself with the agency for work in Saudi Arabia. After waiting for six months we found out that the agency had swindled us. We lost our hard-earned money. So he came with us to the province where he started to work as a fisherman. But we never had a stable income, what with all those typhoons. After giving birth to twins I insisted on returning to Manila."

### **Thanks to Gabriela**

"We have been living in Apelo since 1989. I left my oldest son in the province with my parents-in-law, since he is attending school there. In Apelo, six of us live in one room, the size of which is 4 by 3 meters. There is one window, but we never open it because it opens up to a blind wall. The four children share a cot. My husband and I sleep on a mat on the floor. We also have a table, a bench and three chairs. A corner is set up as a kitchen, with a sink and



a gas tank. We also have an electric fan and a television set. There is electricity, but we have to fetch water at a common pump and share a toilet with four families.

"For a while, my husband earned money as an ice cream vendor. But now he is a scavenger, like most of the people here. In the beginning I also went out to work, but then I had to wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning so that I could wash, cook and clean. And I came home only at 6:00 p.m.

"For about two years now I have been working with the women's organization Gabriela. I actually came into contact with them by chance, when they needed help in preparing for their Christmas party.

"Gabriela had just opened the small clinic, and I found that attractive. The consultations are free, the medicines cheap and, above all, the people are friendly. A big difference from the government medical centers. I became a member of the women's organization and before I knew it, I was already working as a volunteer during a vaccination campaign. Later, I took a six-month course in primary health care.

"As a community health worker I keep the clinic open one morning per week. I clean up a little, examine some patients, and sell medicines. For my efforts I receive a monthly allowance of 500 pesos. I am also responsible for the credit cooperative, which lends money at low interest to women who want to start a small business. Every afternoon I do my rounds to collect the installment payments.

"I enjoy my work a lot; it is certainly better than sitting at home. My husband also supports me in my work, which is indeed an exception here. Although I've had little formal medical schooling, I can help most of the women here with their health problems. Especially being together with other women is one thing I find positive. We have the chance to exchange experiences, discuss problems, and just have fun. The days of the medical training were tough. We had to travel several hours to the office where the classes were being held.

## **Cancer**

"My health problems started about a year ago. I had a dry cough that would not go away. I thought right away of tuberculosis, but the radiograph was negative. Three months ago I began to cough up blood and on the next X-ray there was a black spot that could be seen. I had to go to the hospital for examination. If you come from a poor neighborhood, then the examinations are cheaper in a government hospital. But you have to wait for hours and they often



send you to and fro. After a month I only got results from the blood and urine tests, an ECG and again a radiograph.

When the spitting of blood became worse I decided to go to a private hospital, which was of course much more expensive. After two weeks, the doctors told me that I had cancer that had spread all over my body and that I only had three months to live. Just like that! They suggested that I undergo chemotherapy: one session would cost 10,000 pesos and I had to take six sessions. Where would I get such an enormous sum of money?

"The only thing that went through my mind then was: 'I'm going to die.' After consulting with my friends at Gabriela I went to a homeopath for treatment. Presently, I follow a strict diet: vegetables not treated with pesticides, fruit and rice. My diet is limited to that. No meat, chicken, fish, canned goods, bread. I take homeopathic medicines and three times a day I must have an enema. In two months I lost 14 kilos, but I feel better. The difficulty in breathing is gone. If only I could also get rid of the headache...

"But that could, of course, be due to the worries. The money that my husband takes home every day is all spent for the family's food. Fortunately, Gabriela helps me with the purchase of the medicines. From time to time I also receive some money from friends and relatives. Such support is a boost to my morale. I am not giving up hope. I continue to fight all the way through."

### **Ready For Another Home Delivery**

September 21. After much deliberation Rita found me willing to undertake the delivery of our third baby at home. I am a medical doctor, after all. I have elaborated a training manual on obstetrics and ten years ago, while on internship in Chile, I did perform some deliveries. Then why not help my own wife give birth? I have no choice, because if I refuse I can sense that Rita is capable of doing it all by herself.

We assure ourselves of the help of some female friends, doctors, nurses and a midwife. Our backroom is again transformed into a delivery room. A thorough cleaning, moving out some furniture, a table with wheels with all the necessary equipment, including two pairs of sterilized gloves and a tube to take the blood from the navel for examination. Our *duyan*, the straw hammock, is brought out again. I disinfect the room for the last time and hope that no cockroaches would crawl in during the delivery.



## Rejects In The Regions

October 8. Now it is the turn of the regional CPP leadership in Negros to declare itself 'autonomous'. They reject the "Stalinist, feudal and absolutist leadership of Sison".

The dissidents find an ally in the governor of Negros, a big sugar baron: "This is a positive step. Now that Sison no longer stands in the way, we are in a better position to continue with the peace process. After all, I have always found Sison to be no longer relevant to the Filipino people."

October 17. The last in line is the regional CPP Committee of Central Mindanao, the smallest region on the island.

I share these new developments with Hilde Vannoberghen:

"Apparently, the Rejects are spreading instead of the opposite. I think that the leadership of the movement has underestimated the seriousness of the split. How I wish I could talk extensively with Lean, so that I could place all these reports in context and hear what is the situation of the revolutionary movement as a whole.

"And have you heard the latest news about Roger? He is involved in the setting up of a third trade union, beside the KMU and the BMP, with a social-democratic character."

## Lize

October 18, 5:00 a.m. Rita wakes up her bedmate and private midwife. Her labor has begun gently in the last few hours. We prepare everything for our second delivery at home. The children continue to sleep soundly. I start calling my assistants using the neighbor's phone. Marlyn, the nurse who will take care of the baby, is still asleep. At the home of Junice, a doctor of Gabriela, the telephone is out of order. Leni cannot be reached either, for her mobile phone has run out of battery. And worse, Merly, the midwife, left early in the morning for a training course outside Manila.

Fortunately, Rita's labor does not progress quickly. When Marlyn finally arrives at 8:15, I can still bring Yuri and Mara to school. But when no help comes at 9:00 I go to pull out Leni and Gemma from a meeting and someone else has to pick up Junice with a cab.

The delivery begins at around 1:00 o'clock. Damn, the electricity falls out. Luckily Marlyn has brought with her an emergency lamp. I get disconcerted



when I notice that the child is coming out with its face first instead of its nape. Nevertheless, everything goes perfectly well.

Rita laughs and screams out of relief and joy: *Babaaaa-eeee!* A girl! Barely two hours after the delivery, she sits with Lize in front of the delivery team. Awake, our little girl looks around and goes from arm to arm.

### ***Reaffirm Gets The Upper Hand***

November 30. Bonifacio Day, the commemoration of the worker leader who led the first Philippine Revolution in 1896 against the Spanish colonizers. Organizations identified with Popoy demonstrate together with the TUCP, the archconservative government union. Also present is Jimmy Tadeo, the deposed ex-chairman of the peasant association KMP. He declares that "Right and Left have found each other in their yearning for justice." The super-clandestine ABB urban guerrillas distribute pamphlets that criticize both the Ramos government and the "Stalinists in the CPP". They unfurl giant streamers with the words: "Down with Stalinism!"

The KMU holds its own demonstration, together with the other national-democratic organizations. The *Inquirer* notes: "The KMU did not react to the attacks of the dissident faction, but concentrated on the demand of the workers for higher wages."

December 26, 1993. The Communist Party of the Philippines celebrates today its 25th founding anniversary. In a statement, the CPP declares that after one and half year of the rectification movement it is clear that it has scored a big victory. The Party is confident that the lost areas and forces of the revolution could be recovered in a few years. The CPP must again be in the position to "lead the Philippine revolution from victory to victory". But that requires "much work and struggle".

December 28. Antonio Zumel, a leader of the National Democratic Front, writes a letter to the editor of the *Inquirer*. He explains why a limited number of former top cadres of the revolutionary movement have been accused of errors and crimes and who they are. He also clarifies the essence of the rectification campaign: "This is first and foremost an ideological struggle over line, over correct and wrong ideas, over good and bad practice. Organizational measures are imposed against these people for refusing to admit their errors and for sowing factionalism and intrigues."

I am glad that 1993 is over. For the national-democratic movement, to which I feel strongly bound more than ever before, it was a year of crisis. But also an exceptionally instructive and healing year, a year of purification.







## Chapter Eight

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### Neutrality Unmasked 1994

January 1994. We write to Hilde:

“Normally, our last full year in the Philippines would be starting now. The closer our definitive return approaches, the less enthusiastic we become. In all aspects we are doing perfectly fine here: our job, our house, the school and bringing up the children. Rita is enjoying her work with the women. From today on I will also be working for HEAD, a real challenge in this difficult period of debate and factionalism.”

The Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD) is the organization of health workers that forms part of BAYAN, the umbrella of all national-democratic people's organizations. I have become a member and work with the HEAD's Committee for Policy Studies. This committee gives political training to HEAD's members, organizes information activities for a broader public of health workers and publishes a bimonthly newsletter called *Pulso ng Bayan*, or Pulse of the People.

#### Deadly Milk Powder

March. Rita brings little Lize everywhere in tow, in a baby carrier. Not only to the office and meetings, but also to the slum areas. Nothing is so handy as breastfeeding. But that is less evident in the Philippines than in Belgium. Rita writes an article about it in our newsletter:

“With our youngest toddler Lize, who grows very healthy on a diet of mother's milk, we are confronted with the importance of breastfeeding. In a poor third world country like the Philippines, bottle-fed children have 15 to 25 times more chances of suffering from malnutrition, disease and death from diarrhea than breastfed babies.

“In a poor family, up to 40 percent of the household budget is consumed to buy milk powder for the baby. To remedy this, mothers hopelessly dilute the milk or shift to condensed milk, which is absolutely unfit for babies. Add to that the high hygienic requirements for preparing the milk, which is so hard for poor families to meet, and you have the most important factors that explain the health problems of bottle-fed babies.



“Baby food multinationals promote their milk powder using all legal and illegal means. Since 1986 a Milk Code has been in force in the Philippines, which restricts the promotion of milk powder. But Nestlé and other milk producers ignore the Milk Code. Nestlé donates incubators to Philippine hospitals for their neonatology departments. Other firms distribute samples of milk powder to mothers who have just given birth. They sell milk powder at sharply reduced prices to midwives, who further sell this to the mothers at a profit. This devious approach assures the multinationals that midwives recommend the “right” brand to their unsuspecting patients.

“The firms also pamper medical personnel with all kinds of gadgets: pens, calendars, stethoscopes or teddy bears. The Milk Code is circumvented by not putting the name of the product on these gifts, but that of the firm. This way, Nestlé can always argue that it is an advertisement for chocolate, and not for milk powder.

“The problem with the Milk Code is that it allows too much room for interpretation. In a law that does not totally ban but only regulates these products, gray areas remain, which are exploited to the hilt by first-class lawyers employed by multinational corporations. And although Nestlé and Co. very clearly trample upon the law, the Philippine government refuses to intervene.”

### **The “Third Way”**

Our former friends aren’t going well. Now that the demarcation lines of the ‘debate’ have been drawn and after I have exposed myself during my discussion with Joel Rocamora, Luisa hardly comes to see us anymore. We made her one of Lize’s godmothers, but her gift for her godchild reaches us via a long detour.

March 20. The newspapers announce the formation of a ‘third bloc’ within the CPP. They would supposedly distinguish themselves over the question of strategy and tactics from what the press names as “pro-Sison” and “anti-Sison” groups.

March 24. The *Manila Chronicle* publishes an article about the program of the ‘third force’. The group claims not to be basing itself on Mao, like Sison, but on the “young Marx, a humane Marx who emphasized the rights of the individual”. These former communists want to establish a legal organization called Siglaya. This is an abbreviation for *Siglo ng Paglaya*, Century of Liberation. Siglaya will make use of all means of struggle: elections, lobby work, mass mobilizations. “We are also open to armed struggle, but that should be examined on a case-to-case basis.” It is a public secret that Ricardo Reyes is running the show of the third bloc.



## Another Two Years Gone By

March 26. We are all set to go to the airport. We are going to Belgium for a two-month vacation. Yuri is not looking forward to it, "because it's always cold there". Again we stay at Hilde Vanobberghen's place in Mechelen. This time the place will be crowded with the little Lize along.

Rita's destination is not just Belgium. Nine years after being carried out on a stretcher from a guerrilla zone and repatriated, she is going back to El Salvador for a visit. An old dream, although the circumstances are far from ideal: a Rightist government is in power, not a revolutionary one.

We have considered all the pros and cons of the visit, and we deem that this is the best time to do it. Since early '92 a peace accord has been in force in El Salvador. That means that Rita's name is no longer on the black list and she can legally enter the country. Many friends of yesteryears are still in El Salvador, or have returned since the accord. Finally, Lize is still small enough to join the trip without any problem in her baby carrier.

April 10. We visit our kasama at the NDF in Utrecht. Of course, we have an extensive discussion on the debate, the rectification and the 'split'. A number of NDF cadres and staff members, who previously helped me with UG solidarity work in Europe, have resigned. They viciously attack the NDF, often in a childish manner, like in the pamphlet parodying the film *Jurassic Park*. "NDF International Office, Utrecht's Jurassic Park. Come have a look at the political dinosaurs: *Sisonosaurus Rex*, *Jalandonisaurus Rex* and *Armando Liwanag Rex*. Admire the prehistoric document *Reaffirm*. Video for sale: *A million years before Christ: The origins of Sison's thinking*."

## Rita In El Salvador

May 10. When they ask me upon my arrival at the airport if this is my first time to visit the county, I think by myself "in this way" and I say yes without blushing. Marc 'Jonathan' Ingelbrecht is waiting for us. I do not tire of looking at the beautiful, green, mountainous landscape. How often did I not curse these hills when, after a long night of walking with a heavy knapsack, yet another hill had to be climbed.

I am pleased to still see so many *compañeros* again after almost ten years. There are so many things to talk about. They tell us how the war changed through the years, about *compañeros* who fell in battle, about the hope everyone cherished when the final offensive of the guerrilla war was being prepared at the end of 1989, and about their confused feelings when the peace accords were



signed. When they came down to the city, they were all at once were called by their real names again, and had to try not to react to the droning of helicopters.

May 17. Together with Lize we tour the little country. We go on a 'pilgrimage' to places where I set foot before, slept in a hammock, waited for the bombings to end.

My impressions begin with "what a relief that war is over" but soon evolve into "has everything been in vain?" The FMLN is now legalized, has participated in the elections and has a number of elected members in the parliament and city councils. But the peace accords are hardly implemented, especially those provisions relating to the important socio-economic reforms. And the extreme Rightist death squads are still active and murdering FMLN cadres.

*Compañeros* are devoting much energy to NGO work. Almost all NGOs receive funds from the USAID, the official development agency of the United States. And isn't there a saying "You don't bite the hand that feeds you"?

What a difference indeed. Before, things happened from the grassroots up, with everyone working for a new society, for the revolution. Nothing much of it has remained. There are still a few promising projects, especially those run by people who place the collective interest above that of the individual, something they learned in the revolutionary movement. Those who have now received some land to till, are looking for ways to solve their problems, together with the strongly organized community. One of the communities has even declared a fallen guerrilla a saint and named their new village, San Pablo del Serrate, after him.

### **The Trade Union Situation In Manila**

June 11. We fly back to Manila. Mara is celebrating her birthday: she's three now.

Norma, who is running the international department of the KMU, informs us about the recent developments in the workers' movement. The BMP, the newly formed anti-KMU trade union, has taken a unity initiative named Caucus for Labor Unity. Except for the KMU, which was not invited, all the other trade unions, including the yellow union TUCP, have joined in. The latter was the only trade union allowed under Marcos. The TUCP linked class collaboration in the enterprises to support for the ruling regime. But the BMP is of the opinion that "ideological, political and organizational differences should be set aside in the higher interest of the workers, trade union unity and the collective struggle".



A month later it is the differences between the exploiters and the exploited that have to be set aside, in view of the decision of the BMP and the TUCP to sign a Social Pact with the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the country's association of employers, and the Department of Labor. The pact supports the government policy to promote exports and improve the competitiveness of the Philippine industry. In other words, the BMP is supporting Ramos' Philippines 2000 program.

In the pact, the trade unions make assurances of improved efficiency, higher productivity and quality. In exchange, the employers promise to pay more attention to union rights. And, as if they were children taking their first communion, they pledge to see to it that labor standards are complied with.

The company bosses will have their hands full: in the first eight months of 1993, 14,328 violations of labor standards have been reported.

### **A Beauty Pageant In Times Of Cholera**

The Philippines is struggling with its worst cholera epidemic in years. The number of cholera victims was decreasing in the past years. Now this typical poor man's disease has spread to 30 of the country's 73 provinces. According to official figures, more than 150 people have died from it. The real figure must be several times higher. Cases of death due to diarrhea, where the stools are not examined, are classified under the general term gastro-enteritis, even though they could be cases of cholera. And in remote areas, many cases of death and their causes are not reported at all.

President Ramos puts the blame for the cholera epidemic on the poor and their "unhygienic habits". "You are just throwing garbage anywhere without thinking of its consequences to health," preaches Ramos in a scolding tone. But he keeps silent on the fact that 40 percent of the Philippine population has no access to clean water or sanitation.

Is there any better way to make people forget their miseries than by holding a beauty contest? Manila is hosting the Miss Universe beauty pageant. The occasion gives Ramos the chance to polish the country's international image, exactly 20 years after Marcos was able to get the Miss Universe contest held in Manila. And just like Marcos, Ramos lets a number of streets and communities of the city be spruced up by throwing 400 streetchildren, without trial, into jail for the duration of the competition. Protest actions are held against the beauty contest. The women's organization Gabriela calls the Philippine government a pimp for hosting the Miss Universe finals.



## Medical Neutrality

During our absence the debate within the people's movement has blown over into the ranks of progressive health workers. The discussion revolves around one theme: medical neutrality. We in the Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD) hold on to a view different from that of the Medical Action Group (MAG).

MAG was established in the early '80s to conscientize health workers to defend human rights, in the context of the national democratic struggle. A good initiative, for there were many thorny issues concerning human rights and health work. The government forbade NGOs to go on a medical mission to faraway areas. The military intimidated, forcibly disappeared or killed village health workers. Soldiers arrested the wounded in hospitals, on suspicion that they were NPA members.

MAG launched the concept of medical neutrality, meaning that health workers and patients should be respected and protected at all times, also in situation of armed conflict, and that all patients are equal and have the right to medical care. On T-shirts MAG printed a provision of the code of medical ethics: "I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient."

These days MAG asserts that the same medical neutrality forces it to remain impartial in the ongoing debate. MAG says it continues to adhere to the national democratic orientation, but chooses the third way, the way of gradual reforms within the system. Many MAG members are strongly against this change of course. This is an occasion for HEAD's Committee of Policy Studies to do some research on the background and meaning of medical neutrality.

Rita recalls that the term medical neutrality was used in El Salvador in the early '80s. In a situation where not only medical posts of the guerrillas but also vehicles and buildings of the Red Cross were targets of the government army, the call for medical neutrality was a specific denunciation of the Salvadoran regime. But the Salvadoran human rights organizations also took a more and more neutral position on the social and political conflict in their country. Their function as watchdog against government repression became diluted and they soon lost credibility with the people's movement.

Research in the library and archives teaches us that the interpretation of 'political neutrality' goes well beyond the original objective of medical neutrality. *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* has sent us copies of the documents of an international conference on *The Violation of Medical Neutrality* held in Maastricht in 1991. Frits Kalshoven, professor of International



Humanitarian Law, comments that the term medical neutrality does not exist at all in international law. As early as 1906, the French Professor Renault explained why: "To say that doctors are neutral would suggest that they are indifferent with respect to a conflict wherein the future of their country is at stake." Freely translated: Only those who are indifferent to the fate of the people can take a neutral position with respect to the liberation struggle in El Salvador or in the Philippines.

In their conclusions, the conference organizers confirm what is problematic about the concept of medical neutrality. It can lead to an interpretation of impartiality, something that is definitely not asked for in the Code of Medical Ethics for health workers. The wish to make the war more humane through medical neutrality and respect for human rights can lead to the will to end all wars at whatever cost, something that the International Humanitarian Law does not require. On the contrary, it is recognized internationally, historically and even by the Church that to take up arms against a cruel and repressive regime is justified. I make the following consideration: Is it the war that we should make more humane, or is it society, even if it takes a (liberation) war to achieve it?

### **MAG's Neutrality In Practice**

Using this as background information, the HEAD's Committee for Policy Studies decides to scrutinize the work of the Medical Action Group in the past few years. We run into an issue of *Progress Notes*, MAG's newsletter, of 1992. There stands MAG's response to an NPA attack in Mindanao on February 15 that year. Forty-seven soldiers lost their lives in that encounter. I still recall how the press howled lustily about the "NPA bandits who executed and beheaded soldiers after their surrender", and about "dozens of child soldiers in the NPA's ranks".

And what did MAG write? "This tragic incident reminds us of the human cost of war." I can understand well that MAG cannot openly applaud a victory of the guerrillas, but calling it a "tragic incident" is too much for me. All wars have, of course, a human cost, but has MAG also taken into account the human cost of the 'peace' under the prevailing system? Or the tremendous cost of poverty, misery, disease and death brought about by centuries of exploitation and oppression?

MAG is completely going out of bounds when it calls for an "impartial investigation, particularly on the reported participation of children in the tactical offensive". A totally unfounded and fabricated accusation, totally, an example of psychological warfare in the government press.



A further evaluation of the work of the MAG has made us notice a certain rapprochement towards the Ramos regime. MAG speaks positively about the vaccination campaign of Health Minister Flavio, the man who has declared that "health is neutral and knows no ideology". MAG finds "the use of vaccination for establishing peace promising".

MAG sees militarization as the only problem besetting Philippine society. "The solution is plain and simple: stop the total war and compensate the damage by psychosocial rehabilitation. Vaccination campaigns, health care and ceasefire can be of help to this." Helpful to whom? A recently published glossy brochure of the Department of Health contains photos of army helicopters and soldiers in full battle gear accompanying vaccination teams. An officer of the Armed Forces of the Philippines declares plainly that the National Vaccination Day has been very useful for its counterinsurgency campaign.

HEAD decides that MAG is guilty of all the deviations from medical neutrality that the Maastricht Conference has warned against. Step by step they replaced medical neutrality with political neutrality. In the Philippine liberation struggle and in the debate, they claim to take an impartial position, "indifferent towards a conflict in which the future of the country is at stake".

### Extra Time

July 12. Rita's letter to our parents:

"We have started once again with a basic course for women of the slum areas: two days of training per week, in a period of four to five months. One woman has already stopped attending, she is now working as a bus conductor. Twice for four hours straight, she will be standing in the zigzagging bus, squeezing her way through sweating bodies, in the heat and stench of Manila: a rotten job. But with only the meager remuneration that we are able to pay our health workers, supporting a family is impossible.

"Yesterday I took five Belgian visitors to Apelo. A fine group from the Christian Workers Movement, headed by Cecile Harnie of the antiracist organization *Objectief 479.719*. The customary tour around the community and a chat with the women in the clinic.

"But this visit I call 'customary' is for our guests an intense confrontation, Cecile told me today. She said that the group was so deeply impressed that they needed a long discussion to be able to express and share their emotions and impressions."



The dye is cast. In consultation with our Filipino and Belgian partner organizations, Rita and I have decided to add one more year to our stay. First and foremost, because our Filipino host organizations had been insisting on it. Rita gets more and more responsibilities in Gabriela, and I in CHD and now in HEAD. Now that we are well integrated and have mastered Tagalog, our contribution to the projects is greater than before.

Another reason to prolong our stay: in this children-friendly society and with a flexible work arrangement, combining two full-time jobs and three children is a lot more feasible in Manila than in Brussels. And who in Belgium can have the luxury to breastfeed her child for one year and a half?

### Season Of Protests

July 25. The annual State of the Nation address of the president. Traditionally, the protest season opens with it. I march with a HEAD contingent in an anti-President Ramos demonstration organized by BAYAN, the alliance of the national democratic people's organizations. In an underpass, a few kilometers from the parliament building where Ramos delivers his speech, we are held back by the military police. We become furious as the police allow two other groups to pass through the cordon. Those are the organizations led by Popoy Lagman and by the so-called third force, who bolted the national democratic movement. They focus their criticism on the plan to increase the value-added tax demanded by the IMF. Therefore they are calling themselves ComVAT (Combat VAT) and KillVAT. BAYAN goes beyond that. We condemn not only the policies of Ramos, but the IMF in its totality. Our slogan is *Baklas-IMF*, Break the IMF.

### Meeting Neneng Anew

July 29. The fifth anniversary of the Council for Health and Development. We organize an anniversary meeting with 150 members, volunteers and supporters of the Community-Based Health Programs. To underscore our link with the people and their struggle, we have invited as speakers the chairpersons of the peasant organization KMP, the trade union center KMU and the women's organization Gabriela. And as an added special feature, a gay who, with clenched fist, reads a message from the newly established organization Pro-Gay.

After the celebration, a woman, smiling broadly, approaches Rita and me. "Hello, *kumusta na kayo?*, how are you doing?" It is Fe 'Neneng' Mamon, the congenial doctor we met in November 1987 during our exposure trip to Negros. I hardly recognize her, after such a long time. Neneng is now chairing the health organization HELP on the island of Panay, not far from Negros. She also has a small clinic in a provincial town. To our surprise, Neneng has now three



children: aside from the adopted Aleng, she now has her own and has adopted another one.

"Do you know Sister Luisa of the Netherlands?" asks Neneng. Yes, of course, we know her. She is the godmother of our youngest child. Neneng tells us that Sister Luisa's congregation has just approved the funding of a big HELP project. The sisters have deposited the money, almost 20,000 US dollar, on Luisa's personal bank account, for HELP-Panay does not have a dollar account.

Neneng wants to know how the money can be sent to Panay. I inform her of the fact that Luisa's political allies are all Reject. I'm afraid Luisa will try to know first the political stand of HELP-Panay before remitting the money. Neneng requests if I could follow it up with Luisa, because she is immediately going back to Panay.

August 4. I look for Luisa to discuss with her how the money from her congregation could be quickly sent to Neneng. She of course wonders what business I have with it. There is nothing unusual with it, I explain. HELP-Panay is a member organization of the CHD, I work at the CHD, and I know both Dr. Mamon and Sister Luisa. But I draw a blank. Luisa wants to go to Panay first to inspect the project on the spot. Nevertheless, the congregation has not attached any requirement on the release of the money. I call up Neneng and she is willing to receive Luisa and accompany her to the project site. But that will definitely be very difficult, with military operations going on in the area.

## **HEAD Versus MAG**

August 13. General Assembly of HEAD, with more than 70 people present. The controversy with MAG on medical neutrality and the option to support the national-democratic movement are the main agenda.

How we in HEAD see our dedication as progressive health workers is put firmly in a resolution. This is based on our research on the question of medical neutrality. HEAD no longer uses this term, but speaks of "our collective medical ethics and political commitment". The resolution decides:

"1. HEAD renews its commitment to serve the people wholeheartedly, with a strong bias for the oppressed and exploited basic masses and their people's organizations. By means of their exposure to the ill-health brought about by the structural problems of Philippine society, progressive health workers and students have the particular political responsibility to actively support the people's struggle for genuine national sovereignty and democracy.



"2. This option is clearly not a neutral one, but it is the most principled and ethical application of humanitarian law in the broadest sense. For it means choosing to struggle against a system of structural violence, inequality and injustice; and for a new society that will create the conditions for the complete human development of the people.

"3. Invoking neutrality in a situation of armed conflict born out of socioeconomic problems is impossible and unacceptable. Objectively, everyone who proclaims himself to be neutral helps the status quo to remain in place, and thus wittingly or unwittingly supports the U.S.-Ramos regime."

The meeting is already going on for two hours when a group of about ten loyal MAG members--who are also HEAD members--storm the hall. They want to read their resignation letter, in which they claim that human rights are beyond classes, that everyone must accept the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because it has been ratified by practically all countries in the world, that the human rights movement is apolitical, and that they themselves will always remain NDs, national democrats.

"Beyond classes", "everybody", "apolitical": the contrast with HEAD's resolution is striking. We make the political choice to side with the people in their struggle against the prevailing system. Those who have fundamental objections to this option do not belong to HEAD, according to the general assembly. "Our organization will perhaps become a bit smaller, but a lot better."

August 19. The Medical Action Group holds a symposium on human rights and medical neutrality. HEAD wants to take this opportunity to have a principled debate. A well-prepared group of 40 members go there.

The papers read at the symposium fail to touch the essence. During the forum a number of HEAD members air their views. We even read our resolution concerning medical ethics. But it is an exercise in futility. The people of MAG refuse any serious discussion. They rather play a foul game: booing, ridiculing and interrupting our speakers, while applauding their own. When the MAG audience becomes too noisy while Monina, a young nursing student, speaks, I stand up and ask that all speakers be accorded the same respect. Anyway, what we are discussing here is human rights, aren't we? But one of them shouts: "Shut up, you foreigner!"

Every discussion becomes impossible now. The MAG symposium ends in an anti-climax. The total rupture between MAG and HEAD is a fact.



### Father Frank, Guerrilla Priest

September 12. I leave for Davao City, the biggest city of Mindanao island, to give a training on project management to the staff of all community-based health programs on the island. The biggest topic of conversation during the *merienda*, the afternoon break, is the recent death of Frank Navarro, one of the best-known priests who had joined the armed struggle. Just over a month ago, Father Frank was killed in an enemy's surprise attack. Velvet and Leleng, Shalom and Louie paint a picture of this legendary figure. Not that they have known him personally, but in Mindanao a lot of stories and anecdotes about the man do their rounds and the local press has written extensively about him.

Father Navarro was ordained as priest in 1975. As Director of Social Action of the diocese of Tandag, he was confronted daily by the grinding poverty and immense injustice. Gradually, his option for the poor became clearer. He was to be seen at land occupations, strikes and demonstrations. For a brief period of time, Father Frank was also a parish priest in two village communities, until the Marcos dictatorship issued a warrant of arrest against him in 1983. This forced the priest to shift his area of activity to the guerrilla zones.

Father Navarro soon became the popular and well-loved Ka Migo, Comrade Friend (from the Spanish *amigo*). He became political officer of a guerrilla unit and later member of the regional NPA command. During the peace negotiations with the Aquino regime in 1986-1987, Frank Navarro represented the regional NDF. On several occasions, he would land in the press when he was tasked to hand over the NPA's prisoners of war to the authorities.

In the first years of his stay in the hills, Father Frank continued now and then to perform his priestly functions in the barrios covered by the guerrilla front. He would later put aside these priestly functions after he decided to marry a kasama.

With such a personal history, Father Frank/Ka Migo definitely aroused the hatred of the military. A one-million-peso bounty was put on his head. He was announced dead nine times by the government propaganda and the press regularly wrote of the guerrilla priest's surrender.

Fate would have its course on August 9, 1994, at 5 o'clock in the morning. It was Father Frank's turn to do sentry work in the NPA camp. After noticing military soldiers in the bushes, he ran back to the camp, shouting to warn the comrades of the imminent danger. Rifle shots hit Ka Migo in the thigh and the back. In the ensuing firefight, the NPA managed to kill three government soldiers, but for Father Frank all help came too late. His comrades cleaned his lifeless body, rolled it in two banigs (mats) and buried him on the spot.



Initially, the military had no idea that it was Ka Migo that they had killed. Even after the underground Christians for National Liberation and the NDF announced his death, his enemies remained unconvinced. A general declares: "Navarro is for sure dying of laughter over the news of his death."

To dispel all doubts and to give his family and friends the chance to honor their departed loved one, the body of Frank Navarro was exhumed on September 6. A convoy headed for the hills. It was a varied group: members of NGOs and people's organizations, the provincial governor (who is a doctor and was tasked to lead the autopsy), the brother of Frank (a former communist cadre, now mayor of Marihatag), the bishop of Tandag, and some priests. The body was recognized as Father Frank's. Everyone was surprised that, despite the difficult circumstances, just shortly after an armed encounter in the mountains, he was given such a respectable burial by the kasama.

The re-burial of Frank Navarro will take place on September 17, a day after the end of our training. Velvet and Leleng are going. They suggest that I come along.

### **Ka Migo's Burial**

September 17, 5 a.m. After spending a sleepless night on the bus, we alight in an unsightly village on Mindanao's east coast that answers to the name Marihatag. Even in the twilight we easily find the place where we ought to go. Half of the street is closed off and crammed with tables where dozens of people sit. Some are still drinking the local rum, the others taking their morning coffee. The rum drinkers promptly set their bets on a mahjong game; at the coffee table a sober game of chess is being played. Also here are a number of families sleeping on camp beds and the comings and goings of dozens of newly-arrived guests. At this early hour, there is already much interest.

The event is taking place in front of this street's biggest house, which is provided an extension with an awning for the occasion. Under the awning is a coffin surrounded by wreaths. Some old women are kneeling, murmuring prayers and singing novenas with rasping voices. It seems like an ordinary Filipino funeral wake.

But a closer look reveals that the cloth wrapped around the coffin is the banner of the National Democratic Front. Wreaths of all sizes are filled with messages from revolutionary organizations. One of them has the hammer-and-sickle symbol of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The photographs on top of the coffin show a young man in priestly robe on the one hand, and a smiling guerrilla wearing a Mao cap and holding an M-16 rifle on the other. Here lies in state an extraordinary man: Frank 'Ka Migo' Navarro.



8 a.m. No less than 17 priests and the bishop of Tandag attend the memorial celebration with the theme "I died because I served the people." The church is overflowing with people and hundreds have to stand. They come from all walks of life, but there are a lot of common folk.

A young girl sobs unconsolably. She is the first *lumad* (indigenous people of Mindanao) to have graduated from the NPA's literacy school set up by Ka Migo. Also among the bereaved is a former police chief. The man was arrested by the NPA a few years ago. For 16 days he was heard by a people's court under the leadership of Ka Migo for 12 crimes that he had committed, among them several murders. But this man showed remorse, underwent re-education in a barrio covered by the guerrilla zone and is now active in a peasant organization.

Bishop Amantillo stresses that this is not a moment to grieve, but to be thankful that Father Frank has made the ultimate sacrifice: that of his life. Father Frank was his best priest because he was the simplest: he was the only priest in the diocese who did not want to have a maid or laundry woman in his employ, the only one who did all the household chores himself. The bishop concludes: "We hope that the spirit of Father Frank will continue to inspire us so that we may be conscious that there are many possibilities--no matter how unconventional--to serve God and the people."

Mayor Navarro, Ka Frank's brother, is wearing a red shirt. Ka Migo had requested that no one should wear black if he died, because red for him was the color of hope, of the revolution, of the future. The mayor challenges today's priests to follow Father Frank's footsteps. He also lashes out at the military (who are present in plain clothes) for the continued intensification of the total war, despite the NPA's not carrying out any attack in the region for the past two years.

Representatives of the peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, women, youth and the Church, and also Father Frank's parents do the offering. A small choir sings typical sad Filipino songs with hardly concealed 'subversive' lyrics. The mass is followed by a two-hour program, with testimonials, solidarity messages and songs. There's no stopping anyone now: the speeches become more radical. Even a message from the NDF is read. I half expect the singing of the *Internationale* for apotheosis, but it does not happen.

A funeral procession with more than 2,000 people marches towards the local cemetery that offers a magnificent view of the ocean. The whole morning the youth have handily put together bamboo sticks and colored paper to make placards. In red paint and crooked letters, with mistakes in spelling, they have drawn up slogans against total war, for genuine land reform, and in honor of Ka Migo, martyr of the people.



At the same moment that the coffin is being placed in the grave, the first raindrops fall. It is as if even the heavens are weeping for Ka Migo.

On our way back, we encounter a small scruffy group of demonstrators, most probably drummed up by the military. On their streamers is written very neatly and without spelling mistakes that "conflicts are out of fashion" and that it is "time for reconciliation". They also issue the call that Father Frank's death should not be avenged and that we should bid the armed struggle farewell. No one pays any attention.

### **Sister Luisa's Missionary Position**

October 11. Neneng of Panay is on the telephone. In mid-August Sister Luisa went to visit the HELP project. She wasn't able to go to the villages where the project is being implemented because of ongoing militarization in those areas and transport problems. Now she writes Neneng, stating that she learned from "reliable sources" that Neneng's project is a "ghost project". She claims that Neneng has not exerted enough effort to bring her to the project site.

After Luisa's telephone consultation with the mother superior of her congregation, the 20,000-dollar funding remitted to Luisa's bank account is withheld. The sisters suggest that a "more accessible" and "more feasible" project should be submitted for funding.

Neneng and the whole HELP staff are deeply dismayed. I am furious at Luisa, at her meddlesomeness and underhanded way of dealing. I ask Neneng for all the details of the entire project. She also faxes to me the correspondence between Sister Luisa, her congregation and HELP-Panay. In my capacity as a consultant at CHD, of which HELP is a member, I immediately write a letter to the sisters' congregation.

"Dear Sisters,

"Warm greetings from the Philippines!

"Recently, we have had disturbing and disappointing letters and calls from Panay in connection with the miscommunication surrounding the already approved and remitted funds for the HELP project.

"Sr. Luisa refuses to remit the money to HELP, for which she gives a different reason every time. Initially, she said that she would bring the check with her upon her visit to HELP-Panay. After failing to do that, she said she would instead send it through the bank. When she got a bank account number under the names of Dr. Fe Mamon and Dr. Elizabeth Riel, two HELP doctors,



she demanded a bank account under the name of the organization. When that too was arranged, Sr. Luisa suddenly asked for yet another visit to the project.

"Finally, there was her blunt refusal to release the money, because she heard 'from reliable sources' that the 'health program of HELP-Panay does not exist, or exists only on a minimum scale'.

"Sr. Luisa has neither held any consultation with HELP nor sought or given any explanation about this matter. We have always held the assumption that your congregation works according to the modern development principle of partnership, but it appears that Sr. Luisa still clings to the old missionary style.

"We could not deduce from any communication that Sr. Luisa had been given by your congregation the authority to inspect the project. Nevertheless, she demanded to do this immediately. She had talks with the HELP staff and health workers of the project. She could look into the reports and photos and she was even brought to San Remigio. The villages where the project is being implemented could however not be reached because the area was heavily militarized at that time.

"But Sr. Luisa seems to have a peculiar view about military operations. Villages that are completely shut off by the military, where a curfew is imposed and where various military checkpoints along the way are erected, those do not count to her. Her comment about whether HELP is not a 'presumably legal program' (and thus shouldn't fear anything from the military) is an outrageous and irresponsible insinuation. This can have terrible consequences for the HELP staff in Panay, in a situation still characterized by widespread human rights violations and suspicion of one and all who want to alleviate the lot of the poor and to defend them.

"Personally, I am convinced that Sr. Luisa's unreasonable interference has only one cause, namely her links with a specific faction in the Filipino people's movement. Obviously, these people have told Sr. Luisa that they have lost political control of HELP-Panay. HELP is indeed independent of that group.

"Sr. Luisa's attitude has led to the blowing up of long-term relations of friendship, trust and partnership; spreading of false rumors, half-truths and outright lies; the canceling of already granted funds for a humanitarian project for primary health care; and exposing dedicated workers of the community-based health programs to danger.

"We continue to trust in the honest concern of your congregation to support grassroots projects in the Philippines. Thus, we suggest, as soon as the wounds



caused by this ugly affair are healed, that you directly communicate with HELP-Panay, without Sr. Luisa as intermediary.

"With friendly regards."

### **'Drowned houses!'**

October 21. Typhoon Katring rages through Manila and inflicts enormous damage. For two days, the city has no electricity.

November 3. Barbara from Mexico is in the Philippines to get acquainted with the work of Gabriela. She is staying with us. Rita goes with Barbara and the kids to the area of Pinatubo and notes:

"After the typhoon of two weeks ago, there have been mudflows once again. A sad scene: an extensive, grey desert where nothing stands any longer, a moonscape. Here and there you see a roof protruding. "Drowned houses!" cries Mara. There is so much dust. We visit an evacuation center. Peasant families now live there. They are pressed together into small rooms, without any perspective for the future. They have lost their lands and jobs. A number of them have been here since the volcanic eruption in 1991, the rest have arrived in the last months as a consequence of the mudflow."

### **With The Mangyan Of Mindoro**

Mid-November, 1994, the north coast of the island of Mindoro is hit by an earthquake; 67 people die, many thousands are rendered homeless. CHD is asked to supply medical personnel for a mission to the disaster area. I volunteer, together with a group of senior medical students. Also with us is Georgina, a Mexican doctor who has replaced Barbara in our guestroom last week.

November 30. The six of us leave Manila. We take the bus to Batangas, and from there a ferry to Mindoro. We get a briefing in the office of a local NGO. They tell us that the people in the worst hit coastal villages no longer know where to stock up the aid supply they have gotten. In the remote villages, however, the people are left to fend for themselves.

There live the Mangyan, the indigenous people of Mindoro. It is there that we are bringing goods and medical services. The earthquake has not caused serious material damage to the Mangyan villages, but many residents are still suffering from psychological trauma. Very understandable for a people who are fully dependent on nature and were suddenly faced with what nature is capable of doing.



With yet a group of ten local NGO workers and volunteers we crawl into a jeepney. It is already dark when we alight along the side of a muddy path. We walk our way further, into the village of Bacungan. Before us is an extensive moorland, formerly a marsh that has been painstakingly brought under cultivation by the Mangyan in the last ten years, using as their only tools, their bare hands.

Just like most other indigenous peoples, the Mangyan originally lived on the coast. The arrival of the settlers throughout the years drove them to the mountains and forests. Now that the riches of the rainforest are also mercilessly plundered, the Mangyan are driven away further to end up in this marshland.

For almost three hours we stumble along and through the ricefields, half of which lie fallow. We often find ourselves in ankle-high mud and water. As difficult as with the guerrillas, with the difference that we need not keep silent here. We can curse out loud. Finally, we see through the rays of our flashlights a very small bamboo hut. A Mangyan elder puts out his head and winks at us. One by one, we climb our way inside, using a piece of tree trunk with grooves hewn into it. The man wearing just a piece of cloth to cover his private parts, invites us to spend the night in his hut. How that is possible does not sink into us right away, fifteen of us in this very small hut which consists of only one small room! We lie down close to one another on the uneven flooring of narrow bamboo laths.

### **"Just Let It Pass..."**

December 1. Waking up early, with stiff bones. I am amazed as I look around. This is the poorest and most primitive that I have seen in the Philippines. In the small one-room hut, next to nothing is to be found: just some sheets and clothes in the corner, a pair of kitchen pots and a machete.

I go outside and end up talking with some Mangyan who are from the outlying villages and have come here out of curiosity. They brought with them some vegetables. A woman begins to clean them. They eat rice only once a day, for the land is not fertile. This is public land, but since the Mangyan have cultivated it, some lowlanders are beginning to eye it.

The Mangyan have no concept of the money economy. They are practically completely self-reliant, but at a very primitive stage. They do not have work animals or ploughs at their disposal and they don't even have simple tools. If ever they need money to buy something that they cannot raise, find or make--like salt, matches or nails--they go to collectively sell crops in the market. Off-harvest season, the men sometimes sell their labor to lowlanders for a short period of time. Their wage: barely 60 pesos a day. (The minimum cost of living



is 240 pesos a day for a family of six.) Sometimes they are paid in kind. One told me that the worn-out, second-hand T-shirt he's wearing was his wage for two days' hard labor on the land!

Aside from the muddy water in the ricefields and a small turbid spring, water is very scarce here. The people here hardly wash themselves, and we just do the same.

Georgina comes to sit with us. Together we try to get a picture of the health situation here. For the 118 families living in Bacungan no medical services exist. The children have not been vaccinated. Three months ago a cholera outbreak killed five people.

The Mangyan go to the hospital only in cases of extreme emergency. Aside from the fact that there is no money for it, they experience gross discrimination in the public hospitals. Here is a typical incident: a week ago, a villager suffered a backbone injury resulting from the earthquake and was brought to a hospital. Two days ago, the patient was carried back to Bacungan. The hospital did nothing to him: no dossier was drawn up, no examinations, no treatment. Yesterday the man passed away...

Death is always around here. If there are no home remedies for a serious illness and no money to go to a doctor or to a clinic, the Mangyan say in resignation: *Mapabayaan*, just let it pass.

### **An Open Air Medical Clinic**

At 11 o'clock a small area of firm ground between the ricefields is overfull of Mangyan families. The medical mission can begin, in open air. We sit on laid down bamboo poles, with a tarpaulin above our heads to protect us from the burning midday sun. Luis first gives, in a graphic and humorous way, a lecture on proper health care to the very attentive audience. How to recognize pneumonia in small children. What to do with diarrhea. Personal hygiene is one topic that we find hard to dwell on, for water is almost unavailable here. The same with the importance of vaccinations, for where are they supposed to get them? And what about a balanced diet, when the people here have nothing but rice and root crops to eat?

We move on to the consultations. With four doctors, including me, we treat 138 patients. For many, this is the first time in their life that they see a doctor and get medicine. Everyone wants to get hold of those mysterious medicines in colorful little bottles and boxes.



December 2. We trek to the village Magtibay, which clearly looks better. It can be reached by road and most of the houses are made of wood and are relatively spacious. We see women in traditional attire. The skirt is made of a long string of beads made of coconut shells, which is spun around the middle one hundred times or more. I wonder why we have not seen this traditional clothing in the more primitive Bacungan. I will just have to gulp down the explanation. The people there are too poor (or have been made so) to be able to keep their culture. Following the storm of last year, all their marshland was submerged under one-and-a-half meters of water. Their huts were washed away, with all their scanty possessions, traditional clothing included.

December 3. We arrive in a bigger village. For the consultations, we have at our disposal two spacious rooms in the multi-purpose hall, a kind of community center. The demand for medical care is less here, just a few dozen patients show up. I attend to making an inventory of the available medicines. In the afternoon, we take a refreshing dip at nearby waterfalls. The next day we return home.

### **Pina's Bone Fracture**

December 12. For a long time it has been going well with Pina, the community health worker of Apelo Cruz who is suffering from terminal cancer. She has even remained active in the clinic of Apelo. That was problematic in the beginning. The people thought that cancer was contagious and did not want to be handled by, or work with her. That gave an occasion to explain the difference between cancer and contagious diseases.

But this morning something goes wrong with Pina. Standing up from a chair she just breaks her right femur. The cancer must have corroded the bone. Pina has terrible pain. In a borrowed car, she is brought to a hospital, but is refused because she is not able to immediately produce the required amount of money! Apparently, a painful bone fracture--and potentially dangerous at that, because of the internal bleeding--is not considered an emergency. And if it is not an emergency case, the patient is required to go to the cashier first.

In the end, Pina is brought to the Gabriela office. Memories of El Salvador and my own hip fracture vividly come to mind. Pina does not want us to touch her leg; it's too painful. With some amount of persuasion we nevertheless manage to perform first aid. Using a strong adhesive tape on her skin, a piece of rope and a self-made sandbag we put the leg in traction. This way both ends of the broken bone are torn apart, the muscles relax and the pain ebbs away.

December 13. Pina has survived the night relatively well. We succeed in having her accepted in another hospital. A friendly orthopedic surgeon is willing



to operate on her for free. Family and friends take turns in watching her, administering medicines, feeding and cleaning her.

### **GATT-damned**

December 14. With 18 votes for and 5 against, the Philippine Senate ratifies the treaty on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which calls for the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on January 1, 1995. This has been in the news for months. Politicians and technocrats were in direct collision with the people's organizations and the NGOs. The one side claims that the WTO would bring progress and prosperity, by further linking the Philippine economy to the world economy and trade. The other side asserts that that is precisely the problem, it will only result in more exploitation and further undermine the country's independence.

The people's organizations predict that poverty in the countryside will worsen by giving priority to export crops over food crops and by liberalizing the importation of agricultural products. That puts the country's food security in danger, and the livelihood of thousands of Filipino farmers as well. The standard comment of Rafael 'Ka Paeng' Mariano, the chair of the peasant organization KMP, is: "With GATT, we will be eating spaghetti for breakfast, asparagus for lunch and cut-flowers for dinner."

But not only agriculture will be hard hit. A more export-oriented industry will result in more labor exploitation in the free-trade zones. The transnational corporations are placed in a better position to kill the local industry, with job loss as a result. Liberalization of trade and services has similar effects. The importation of harmful products like pesticides and toxic waste will be made easier.

The clauses on intellectual property rights mean that the centuries-old wisdom of the indigenous peoples and the natural resources of the tropical rainforest would be prey to the multinational corporations which can patent them. This is already the case with the medicinal herbs *sambong*, *lagundi* and *banaba*.

There are more negative effects on health care. The patent right on medicines are being extended from 17 to 20 years. That means three years more waiting for generic and cheaper products. The import liberalization also applies to hospital and laboratory services and to the medical insurance, whereby foreign commercial enterprises will be allowed to further suck the Filipino patients dry. Finally, the clauses on intellectual property rights make it almost impossible to avail of cheaper pirate versions of scientific literature. This has



been the prevailing practice in the Philippines, and medical students save a lot of money from this.

December 20. Pina comes out of the hospital sooner than is good for her. A room in our office will serve as a patient's room in the coming months. Staying longer in the hospital is unaffordable. Already her hospital bill is dizzying: 7,500 pesos for the internal fixator attached to her femur, 2,500 pesos for X-rays, 10,000 pesos for her stay in the hospital.

Pina does not have health insurance; after all she has neither a regular job nor a regular income. Pina's husband earns as scavenger no more than 100 pesos a day, and she gets 50 pesos a day as volunteer in the Apelo clinic. Together they would have to work 133 days to be able to pay the hospital bills.

December 21. Once again a telephone call from Neneng of Panay. She is beside herself with joy, for we have achieved an unexpected victory. The congregation has blown the whistle on Luisa and how! HELP-Panay received a letter with extensive apologies: Sr. Luisa should have remitted the money immediately. She had no authority whatsoever to inspect the project. She acted on her own and did so irresponsibly, etc. The sisters will be remitting the 20,000-dollar amount once again, and this time directly to HELP-Panay. Being assertive and not being afraid to take the bull by the horns apparently pays.



## Chapter Nine

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### Hilde's Farewell 1995

#### The Pope In Manila

January 1, 1995. "The Lord and the ruler is coming; to him belongs the kingdom, the power and the glory!" That's how Cardinal Sin, the archbishop of Manila, announces the arrival of the Pope.

The group of 300 political prisoners wants to seize this occasion to bring their painful situation to the world's attention. They are demanding their unconditional release. To add strength to their case they decide on a hunger strike.

January 3. The 59 political prisoners in the penitentiary of Muntinlupa, near Manila, start their hunger strike. Dozens of their fellow inmates in other provincial jails follow their example. Most of the political prisoners are simple peasants, workers or people from the slum areas arrested by the military or police on suspicion of being NPA members, supporters, or sympathizers. But the Ramos regime denies the existence of political prisoners.

Most of them have been arrested or convicted of common crimes (murder, robbery, assaults and injuries). Usually it concerns false charges and the charge sheet doesn't mention a political motive. This criminalization of political acts can lead to the most surrealistic situations. For instance, if the NPA attacks, clears out and burns a government military outpost, then the charge will be "burglary with arson".

January 10. The Pope arrives. Pressured by the hunger strikers, who are supported by the people's organizations, Ramos frees a paltry number of 24 prisoners. Most cases concern those who had been ordered released a long time ago, either on humanitarian grounds (there are the sick and a child of 14 among them), or because they have done their time, or because their sentence has been overturned by an appellate court.

January 18. We write home:

"Of course you know that the Pope has been here. His open-air mass was attended by four million people! Everyone had his radio and television turned on constantly so as not to miss anything, just like during the coup attempt five years



ago. Most schools were closed for ten days, for the Pope's visit coincided with the Catholic World Youth Conference; the thousands of guests were billeted in schools. We were lucky twice: the school of our children was not chosen and the Pope stayed away from Quezon City where we live and work, so it remained calm here."

### **Hunger Strike In Muntinlupa**

February 11. On the 40th day of the hunger strike, I join a HEAD medical team to visit the strikers in the Maximum Security Prison of Muntinlupa. Dr. Delen de la Paz, the former directress of the Council for Primary Health Care, and Monina have been here several times and know the guards well.

While they are busy arranging for our passes, I curiously look around. At the entrance of the huge prison complex stands a meter-high, made-of-stone head of the former dictator Marcos. In the waiting room is a hollow patriotic slogan that ends with: "The Philippines is a land where freedom and justice reign."

Our passes are in order, we may go to the barracks of 'the political'. Ramos may claim what he wants, his own prison personnel call these prisoners 'the political'.

The hunger strikers either lie or sit on wooden beds in a big room. They look weakened, but still militant. The badly ventilated and badly lit space is adorned with flags and streamers of people's organizations. On the wall is a photo of solidarity demonstrations in Manila, the U.S. and Europe. Also a message of the National Democratic Front, reiterating that the release of political prisoners will be one of the main items on the agenda of the peace negotiations.

Delen and Monina are immediately approached by a number of inmates. A bit uncomfortable I pick out a wooden bed to sit on and try to begin a chat. My conversation partner is Jaime Salvante, a sinewy old man with gray hair and a deeply furrowed face. He calls another inmate to join us. It's his younger brother Felipe. As is the habit in the Philippines, with the many islands and provinces, population groups and languages, I start with the question "*Tagasaan po kayo?*" Where are you from?

"We are poor peasants from Bicol. One morning in October 1987, Felipe and I were brusquely roused from our sleep. A group of heavily armed military and CAFGU soldiers surrounded our house. They shouted that we should surrender. We had no idea why, but we did not have any choice other than to go with them."



Felipe takes over. "The military accused us of being members of the NPA. They said that we participated in a guerrilla attack in which five soldiers were killed."

"Five military soldiers, do you think we are capable of that?" asks his brother, laughing. "And as if that were not enough, another charge of kidnapping with murder was added."

"And what was the sentence?" I want to know.

"Five government soldiers, that makes five life sentences for both of us," says Jaime, sounding as if that were the most logical thing in the world.

"We were immediately brought to Muntinlupa," Felipe continues. "We hardly have visitors here because our families live in Bicol and Muntinlupa is much too far."

I ask the Salvante brothers what they think of the NPA, for I know first hand that the people's army is very active in Bicol.

The older Jaime doesn't have to think long: "It was thanks to the NPA and the revolutionary peasant organization that we had to give the landlord only 10 percent of our corn harvest. Before it was 50 percent."

We cannot stay long, for these are crucial days for the political prisoners. Today or tomorrow they will decide whether or not to go on with the hunger strike. Forty days of fasting are leaving their mark, and there are those who talk of ending it.

February 13. After 41 days the leading committee of the political prisoners decide to stop the hunger strike. The hope is now placed on the newly created government commission that has promised to look into their cases on an individual basis. Not everyone is happy with the decision. In the leading committee, most of the important positions have been taken over by people identified with the Rejects...

Yes, the debate and the 'split' play a role even among the political prisoners. The dividing line is clear. Should you hold firmly to principles and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, as the national-democratic movement and HEAD do? Or would you rather join with the Rejects and the Medical Action Group in relying on Ramos's amnesty law, on a government commission and on a review of individual cases?



There is also a difference in the attitude towards the hunger strikers. HEAD emphasizes integration with the political prisoners, giving them moral and political support. In the media we propagate their political demands. MAG keeps itself busy with the medical support for the hunger strikers. In their press statement, they don't go much further than complain about their poor health situation. Worse, MAG announces that the political prisoners are depressed and laments that they will have "no visitors on Valentine's Day".

February 20. Siglaya, the breakaway faction of the national-democratic movement which projects itself as the 'third way', has had its founding congress last month. I get hold of a bundle of their congress documents, mostly written by Ric Reyes and Joel Rocamora. They claim that "the NPA has been neutralized", that the "possibility exists that Philippines 2000 will succeed", which will "usher in a new stage in the capitalist development of the Philippines", and that the U.S. domination over the Philippines "has decreased significantly". Attacks against the revolution, and anointment for Ramos and the Americans!

### Changes At Home

February 28. Sad news, as Celia informs us that she is leaving us. Next week she'll be off to Hong Kong. Without our knowledge, Celia applied months ago to an agency that recruits women for work abroad. She heard nothing more of it, but now she suddenly gets a visa and a plane ticket to depart next week. She is leaving with a heavy heart and we, too, are sorry.

But Celia considers going abroad as the only way to earn enough money to be able to support her younger brothers, sisters, nephews or nieces through school and help her sick mother in the province. Celia's job with us is taken over by her sisters Mary and Mercy. Mary, after school hours; Mercy, who has a job, on her day off.

March 1. We have another visitor at home. Leen is a female medical student and is here via *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* to do internship for three months in two government hospitals in Manila.

### The Ata-Manobo Versus Alsons

For centuries now, the indigenous people Ata Manobo have been living in the territory of Talaingod municipality, in the province of Davao del Norte, Mindanao. But for the past 25 years they have been at odds with the logging company Alcantara and Sons (Alsons). From 1969 to 1989 Alsons had a logging permit there. Just when that permit expired, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources introduced a novelty: the Industrial Forest Management Agreement (IFMA). Sounds ecologically friendly: forest management. And



indeed, for an IMFA only allows deforestation--within a 25-year period, extendable for another 25 years--on condition that reforestation be undertaken.

Having well-placed politicians as friends, Alsons managed to secure in 1991 such an IFMA permit, covering 19,000 hectares of Talaingod territory. Because 20,000 hectares is the legal limit, Alsons used another name to get a second permit, good for another 10,000 hectares. The Asian Development Bank, the Asian counterpart of the World Bank, granted Alsons a soft loan of 350 million pesos.

For the Ata-Manobo it appears that the IFMA reforestation is a more serious threat than the earlier deforestation. With deforestation, only the trees are lost; by reforestation the land is also lost, for it is transformed into a plantation. Only one sort of fast growing trees is to be planted there, with no plan to allow for the regeneration of the natural forest. A monoculture requiring the use of a lot of pesticides that destroy the ecosystem, on which the Ata-Manobo, hunters and collectors and simple farmers, are dependent on to a great extent. Besides, the ancestral land of the Ata-Manobo is to be found in Talaingod. If this is taken away, their centuries-old culture would also perish.

Since the implementation of the new IMFA, the Ata-Manobo have been continually harassed by Alsons. The company has the mayor of Talaingod as ally, and the 200 Ata-Manobo who work at the company are also used. The usual divide-and-rule tactic.

To defend themselves from the Alsons' expansion, 50 *datus*, the traditional heads of the Ata-Manobo, founded an organization, the Salugpungan, in 1993. This aroused the ire of Alsons, which called on the military to intervene. Hundreds of villagers fled. In August 1994, after eight months of hardship, 500 Ata-Manobo left for Davao City, Mindanao's largest city.

This caught media attention. Negotiations between Alsons and Salugpungan ensued and ended in an agreement. The logging firm promised not to intrude into the lands owned by the Ata-Manobo who are against the IFMA, and the whole area would be surveyed to determine the ancestral domain of the indigenous people. The refugees decided to return home.

But when the implementation of the agreement came to naught and the harassments by Alsons and the military continued, the *datus* of Salugpungan decided this was the last straw. They declared a *pangayaw*, a traditional way of seeking justice by declaring war against foreign intruders. Fed up with all the provocation, the Ata-Manobo saw this as the last recourse to defend their land, culture and tradition, and even their mere survival. After a last warning, on



October 20, 1994, five employees of Alsons were killed in an Ata-Manobo attack with bows and arrows.

The response of Alsons and the Philippine government was swift. Ten Salugpungan leaders were charged with murder, double murder, attempted murder and double attempted murder. Warrants of arrest were issued. Military and CAFGU deployments in Talaingod were reinforced.

To this day, the Salugpungan datu have been leading a clandestine existence in the expansive mountains and forests of Talaingod.

### **On An International Fact-Finding Mission**

March 6. Against this backdrop, I leave for an international fact-finding mission in Talaingod. The objective is to investigate human rights violations against the Ata-Manobo and to bring food and medical supply to the area. The mission is an initiative of the Protestant United Church of Christ in the Philippines. I am representing CHD and HEAD. About ten local and international human rights and health organizations are taking part.

March 7. We are briefed by datu Pansana. He is one of the ten Salugpungan leaders being hunted by the military. A man with an infectious smile and holes in his earlobes through which one could insert a coin. Rodel, the guy seated beside me, explains that earrings are inserted in the ears on festive occasions.

The datu says that the military burned down a Manobo village last December 30. On February 4 a priest died in a mysterious car accident. The man was a Manobo and supportive of the Manobo struggle against Alsons. From February 24 to 28, just a week ago, 20 families were forced to flee after a new military offensive.

Datu Pansana tells us that the situation of the Ata-Manobo is precarious. Many are suffering from malnutrition and contagious diseases. The Alsons guards have imposed a food and medical blockade at the only entrance leading to Talaingod. No one is allowed to bring in more than five or ten kilos of rice at one time, "for that could go to the NPA".

Meanwhile, Alsons and the military have been carrying out psychological warfare against our fact-finding mission and against Salugpungan in the media. The organization is allegedly being backed by no less than 600 NPA members. We would not be allowed into Talaingod. Mayor Libayao could not guarantee our safety. We allegedly have sinister motives. Etcetera. The day before the mission Alsons placed a one-page advertisement in the *Inquirer*, full of lies and insinuations, with the headline: "Give truth a chance".



March 8. Amid a tense atmosphere we ride three jeepneys towards Talaingod. Many streamers hung along the way. The slogans are all too clear. They demand the implementation of the IFMA and hurl shabby accusations at the NGOs and our fact-finding mission. Clearly the work of Alsons and the military.

The further we go, the stranger we are stared at by the people along the way. After a curve we suddenly encounter a barricade. With some loud uproar and swinging of bolos about 30 Ata-Manobo walk towards us. After we recover from our initial surprise and shock, our negotiating team fulfills its role. But the Ata-Manobo are obstinate. Their leader, someone who speaks much too good Tagalog to be a Manobo, swears to us that Alsons' reforestation project is beneficial to the Ata-Manobo and that the NGOs have nothing good to offer. "I strongly advice you not to go further, for beyond this barricade stand 300 traditional warriors who are really mad at you."

During the discussion a Manobo takes pictures of us, another notes the plate numbers of our jeepneys. To complete the scene, a military jeep arrives. The lieutenant on-duty coolly claims that he cannot do anything about the barricade, even if this is on a public road. He warns that the Ata-Manobo "could indeed become wild". After a last attempt to negotiate, we decide to make an about-face. The mission has failed!

March 9. We give a well-attended press conference in Davao City; two TV stations, two radio stations, five local and one national newspaper want to hear our story. We condemn the holding up of the fact-finding mission. If Alsons, which asks that the truth be given a chance, refuses to let us see the situation in Talaingod, then Alsons must certainly have a lot to hide.

To the press we want to pierce the myth of Philippines 2000. President Ramos has just gone on a mission to Europe to beg for foreign investments. While he announces that reports on human rights violations are unfounded, the Ata-Manobo are confronted with military atrocities and food and medical blockade. And while he endlessly talks about the rapid development of the Philippines, we are witnessing here in Talaingod 'development aggression': development in name, but aggression against the people in reality.

### **Finally With The Ata-Manobo**

After the press conference a young woman approaches me. It is Ana, a quiet participant in the mission. She asks if I am interested to go to the Ata-Manobo via a backdoor. I am the only doctor in the mission and the need for medical assistance is urgent in Talaingod. It is also important to know the situation first-hand and to report on it here and abroad.



I told Rita and the Council that I wanted to visit some health projects in Mindanao after the fact-finding mission. Staying longer is therefore not the problem. Is it not my duty as health worker to lend help to those who ask for medical assistance? But then there is that rather secretive approach by Ana, mentioning something about a "backdoor": would this be a semi-clandestine trip, would there be some truth to the presence of "600 NPA members" in Talaingod?

Ana takes me to a house just outside the city. Within a day or two a guide would come to pick me up. For ten days he would accompany me on my journey to the different villages of Talaingod.

March 13. There is my guide: Barudong, a sturdy man who knows the ropes. He has a heavy motorcycle with a driver, and immediately begins to bind a sack of rice, two boxes of medicines and my backpack onto it. I sit at the back and Barudong sets himself on the gasoline tank, between the arms of the driver. After a two-hour ride we can no longer go further. Barudong and I alight and bid goodbye to the motor driver. I carry a box and my backpack. The heavy sack of rice and the second box are to be carried by Barudong. We still walk two more hours along and through a river before finally reaching a village.

I attract a great deal of attention, but the Manobo also draw my interest. It is mutual. The Manobo women and men also have round holes in their earlobes. Some women have placed round earrings in them, to which they attach their necklaces. The datu is also wearing a necklace on which hang diverse mementos: a little sack with herbs, a safety pin, small bells, an empty bottle of eyedropper... The women invariably keep a thick wadding of tobacco jammed between their upper lip and their teeth. One of them has her reserve tobacco leaves always with her: neatly rolled in the hole of her earlobe. Many have tattoos on their forearms, and the women also on their naked belly. I even see two men with tattoos of cartwheels around their nipples.

On request I immediately hold medical consultations, for no doctor ever comes here. The nearest clinic is hours away, and given the current situation no one could go there. I encounter patients suffering mostly from infections of the upper respiratory tract, diarrhea, malaria and infected wounds. Barudong leads me to a small house, where a woman lies groaning on the ground. She has an abscess that has invaded half of her face. I remove half a cup of stinking pus from it. We move further. Along the way we pass by another small village where we hold a quick consultation. In the afternoon we reach sitio Tibucag, a half-deserted village of just a few simple bamboo huts. . This is where a military operation of the Philippine Army took place two weeks ago. The residents of Tibucag are spending the nights in the woods, like hunted animals. During the day, when everything is safe, they return to the village and their fields.



This unsightly and poor village is one of the nerve centers of Salugpungan, the organization of the Ata-Manobo. Atop a hill lives Datu Ginom, Salugpungan's vice-president, one of the ten wanted. We lay down to sleep in one of the empty huts.

### **Datu Ginom And Datu Lesoro**

March 14. In his one-room hut Datu Ginom receives us heartily. This house is witness to the comings and goings of datus, women and children. They come to ask for advice or just to have a chat. And of course to inspect their "American" visitor. Barudong must translate everything for me, no one here speaks Tagalog.

Ginom says that the people see but one solution to their problems: out with Alsons! And if they don't go willingly, then they must go unwillingly. For should the Ata-Manobo lose their land, they lose everything. Because they are illiterate, it is almost impossible for them to find a job. There are no schools in the wide vicinity, and a literacy project initiated by an NGO had been ordered stopped by the military several years ago.

March 16. Datu Lesoro, Salugpungan's spokesperson, joins Ginom. A funny, loquacious man. Less nice is his insistence to have the clothes I am wearing. For the very poor Ata-Manobo I am naturally a rich Westerner, but I still have to return to the inhabited world outside in a respectable manner.

The two datus discuss what the Ata-Manobo should do. They decide to compose an open letter. They want to make it clear to the authorities and to the public opinion that they are demanding a stop to military operations. They also ask that their ancestral domain be delineated and that the conflict with Alsons have a peaceful resolution.

Neither Ginom nor Lesoro can write. It is Barudong who writes the letter for them and reads it aloud while recording it with an old cassette recorder. A courier will bring the cassette to a local radio station.

### **Hunger And Underdevelopment**

March 17-21. I visit a number of nearby villages. No easy job, with the unrelenting sun above the hills. I hold medical consultations everywhere, notwithstanding my limited knowledge and my limited means. I am running out of medical supplies.

Now that the villagers can hardly work on their farms, they don't have much food. Most Manobo families cannot have three meals a day. Rice is a



scarcity here, the staple food is milled corn. For the rest, the menu consists of vegetables only, or salt only, or sometimes nothing at all. Once in a whole week we get a skinny chicken dish, fairly divided over 20 plates. And one time Barudong magically takes a can of sardines out of his backpack. Some children are really starving, they rush to eat and fight over a few grains of rice left over.

March 23. A brave young guy, Mario, has been to the Talaingod town center last night, through the blockade, to buy rice. Due to darkness, he fell from a rock on his way back. I take care of the gaping wound on his thigh. Fortunately, nothing is broken. Datu Ginom says that a number of adults and children fleeing at night in the woods have lost their lives due to accidents like this.

The leaders of Salugpungan discuss the possibility of asking for a dialogue with the military. The Ata-Manobo have an urgent need for some breathing space. They want to come out of the woods, to go back to their homes and to their farms. Hunger gnaws. But Salugpungan holds on firmly to its demand for an end to the military operations.

I have been terribly bored these last few days. Barudong is not always in the area and without his translation work I cannot converse with anybody. I have finished reading the book I brought with me, Samir Amin's *Maldevelopment*. Theoretical models to explain underdevelopment, while I am here in the midst of the concrete reality of underdevelopment. I ask Barudong if my stay is still needed. Could he perhaps arrange for my departure?

March 25. On my last day with the Ata-Manobo, I am awakened by Datu Lesoro at 4:30 a.m. At the top of his voice, he is reciting his prayers to the god Magbabaya to beseech my safe return. Whether it's because of that, I don't know. But after a very difficult walk and a short motor-ride I find myself safe and well in the city.

## Flor

March 25. While I am journeying through the hills of Talaingod, Rita writes a letter home:

"Has the case of Flor Contemplacion appeared in the newspapers there? Since a couple of weeks the Philippines has been in an uproar, something that we have never experienced before.

"Flor is a Filipina who has been working as a maid in Singapore since 1987. She was accused of killing a fellow Filipina maid and the son of her employer. A complicated story, but everyone here is convinced that she is innocent, or that



at least all the mitigating circumstances should have been considered: the years of separation from her husband and children, the extreme exploitation, the physical abuse she was exposed to. But the verdict is “guilty”, and a death sentence by hanging awaits her in Singapore. The week before the announced execution there was a picket in front of the Singaporean embassy. Up to the last moment lawyers flew to Singapore and President Ramos filed a request for pardon with Singapore’s strongman Lee. Friday morning, March 17, everyone is hooked on the radio and television. When the news of her hanging is announced, there are spontaneous demonstrations. The people are indignant. Twice I join a demonstration, with Lize in a carriage. Today, almost all of my colleagues are attending Flor’s burial.”

Where does that widespread sympathy come from--that mass hysteria, according to some? And why is it that Gabriela and the whole people’s movement are taking part? Isn’t this a doubtful affair, an apolitical issue?

Definitely not. The Philippine government is carrying out a policy of stimulating labor export. In 1993, the Flors--and the Celias--brought in via the official bank channels about 2.2 billion US dollar. This represents 3.4 percent of the country’s Gross National Product, 30 percent of the annual trade deficit, or the total amount spent on servicing the interest on foreign debt. No wonder that President Aquino called the Filipino overseas workers “modern-day heroes”.

In reality, though, they are modern-day slaves. Aside from their untenable living and working conditions, the migrants often experience violence, extortion and fraud from their employers or recruiters. And if something bad happens to these heroes, the Philippine government is quick to drop them as hot potatoes.

### **Never To See Hilde Again...**

Friday, March 31, 2:00 p.m. Rita phones me at CHD. Her sobs and broken voice shock me: “Our Hilde, our Hilde is dead!” – “What? That can’t be possible! How do you know...” – “Boudewijn has just called up.” At the Workers’ Party of Belgium (PTB), Boudewijn Deckers is responsible for relating with the Philippines. “I’ll be there at once.”

As I put down the phone I must have looked pale and aghast, for everyone in the office approaches me: “What’s the matter, Bert?”

I mutter: “*Namatay si Hilde.*” Hilde, Rita’s sister, has passed away. I must go to see Rita immediately.” It is only while walking on the street that tears start to well in my eyes. I hurry to the Gabriela office, two blocks away. All kinds of thoughts go through my head. What could have happened? Was it a car accident? Is it really true?



Rita comes to me and drops herself in my arms crying. "It was her heart. Yesterday, while giving a lecture to students in Ghent. They tried to resuscitate her, but to no avail."

In all my excitement I had forgotten that Hilde was born with a serious congenital heart defect, for which she had to undergo three operations when she was a child. Aside from the conspicuous scars on her chest, nothing would remind one of her heart problem. I look back to our tough journey in Lacub. Hilde never used her heart condition to evade the straining tasks. And to think that she eventually collapsed behind a table...

We wait for Boudewijn's second telephone call. He relates the story anew. And how about the mother and father of Hilde and Rita who are vacationing in Spain? "They have been informed and they are coming home." Rita and I do not hesitate; we decide that the children and we have to leave for Belgium as soon as possible. Even though we have to shoulder all our expenses, as the insurance for NGO workers does not cover this.

It is almost four o'clock in the afternoon when we reach home. On the sofa in front of the house sit Lyn, Yayen and Leni waiting for us. The news of Hilde's death has spread like wildfire and in the best Philippine tradition these friends are here to comfort us. They have brought with them sandwiches, cookies and softdrinks, for they know better than we do that we--even in the absence of the departed--should hold a sort of Filipino death wake in our little apartment. This means the non-stop coming of visitors who all have to eat or drink something.

I go to pick up the children from school and tell them the sad news. Yuri is particularly moved. He was Hilde's godchild. Mara asks incredulously: "Will we never see godmother Hilde again?"

Rita and I cannot sleep the whole night. We cry in each other's arms, talk about Hilde, and discuss what we have to do.

Saturday, April 1. From Rita's office we phone to Belgium. This time we talk with Dirk, Rita's brother. Hilde's body will be cremated. The family has decided to wait for us, but when could we be in Belgium? Just to be sure, the cremation is set on Friday, April 7, and the ash dispersion, the next day. There will be a brief commemoration with the family on Friday night.

We inquire at a travel agency. We cannot leave the country without an exit visa, and that will take three working days, even if you pay for the so-called Express Lane at the immigration service. Nevertheless, we decide to book our flight for April 5, arriving in Brussels the day after.



Boudewijn phones us anew. He asks if we want to write something about Hilde for the weekly newspaper *Solidair*. The PTB, together with a number of other organizations and in consultation with the family, has taken the initiative to prepare a memorial service for Hilde, in the afternoon of April 8 in the *Stadsfeestzaal* in Mechelen. The concern and support of so many people touch and strengthen us.

The CHD people aren't sitting quietly, either. They want to hold a farewell ceremony in Manila for Hilde, a *parangal*. They are fantastic, our Filipino friends!

The only possible date for the memorial is Tuesday, April 4. Teth and Jojo are responsible for the program. A message from Mindano tells us that Hilde Verheyen, a volunteer for *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld*, is arriving to attend the *parangal*. Also arriving on Monday is Stijn, the friend of our intern Leen, to spend his Easter vacation in Manila. He will bring messages of condolence from Belgium and a video camera to film the memorial service.

Sunday, April 2. Stupid, a Sunday. We have to wait till Monday to start this bureaucratic ordeal to get our exit visa. Luckily, CHD also finds a solution to this. The father of a CHD staff member is a high official in the immigration bureau. He could help hasten the procedure for an exit visa.

Monday, April 3. At 8 a.m. I am dutifully standing at the immigration office, and nine hours later I already get a result: we may pick up the exit visa on Wednesday afternoon, just before our plane departs. Meanwhile, Rita goes to the bank and the travel agent and faxes to *Solidair*.

"Hilde, sister, friend and comrade,

"In one of our last letters to you we wrote: 'Everyone here is asking when you will be dropping by.' People's organizations as well as NGOs were all used to your annual visits. Your response was laconic. "If everyone is asking that, then I'll just have to go, right? Where else should I spend my vacation?" You had already booked your flight and you wrote that we didn't have to worry about fetching you from the airport: "I can find my way home." You were indeed at home with us in the Philippines.

"So did we and a host of Filipinos feel at home with you in Mechelen. Just a few weeks ago you hosted two Filipino guests at your place. Back in Manila, Romy, a professor of pharmacology, told us enthusiastically how you, on an early ice-cold morning, brought him to the gate of Van Hool factory to distribute leaflets. And Mel was equally enthusiastic about the big anti-racism



demonstration organized by *Objectief* on March 19, where she marched beside you. You always succeeded in making Third World visitors experience the struggle in Belgium, which is indispensable in a genuinely mutual international solidarity.

"The Filipinos and Filipinas whom you had learned to know especially remember your firmness to principle, your love of work and your sense of responsibility. And also your evident openness and simplicity in dealing with them, your warm friendship and comradeship. No, you won't be coming to the Philippines anymore, you will be staying here, in the heart of the Filipino people, and at their side in their long struggle for liberation from exploitation and oppression.

"Our Filipino friends are deeply moved by your untimely death, Hilde. Just as is customary in other Filipino wakes, many of them came to us at the very first evening to express their condolences and sympathy. Their rare photos with you were passed around while they told their experiences and anecdotes with you. A memorial meeting was immediately planned, just like what is done here for other well-loved figures of the national-democratic movement. It is a great honor, but a well-deserved one, that people here put you in the same league with internationalist doctor Norman Bethune, and with Filipino doctor martyrs Bobby dela Paz (murdered by the military because he supposedly cared for wounded NPA members) and Johnny Escandor (murdered after joining the underground movement).

"Hilde, many of us in Belgium and in the Philippines have to exert extra efforts to fill in the gap that you left behind. We are more than glad to do that with devotion. For as homage to a revolutionary like you, we do not ask a minute of silence but a life of commitment.

*"Mabuhay ka, Kasamang Hilde! Long live Comrade Hilde!"*

Leen fetches Stijn from the airport. He still has a letter from Hilde for us, written on the day of her death:

"Hello,

"Just quickly using these last minutes to tell you what Stijn's suitcase contains:

- a diskette with all the articles you asked for
- a letter for Lean. Are you also giving out Easter eggs there?
- Easter eggs for the three (four? five?) capons



- some reading materials
- a book for my sister's birthday--on time, huh!--and too late for my brother-in-law his birthday

"Regards to Leen. I have no time left to write her a letter.

"Spring has begun here. We've had a lot of snow, hail and rain. Every now and then it still freezes and we get gale. Otherwise, it's fun.

"Greetings,

"Me"

As if she was already feeling her end approaching: "using these last minutes", "no time left", and too early birthday gifts...

### **"Heavier Than The Cordillera Mountains"**

Tuesday, April 4 The commemoration of Hilde is wonderful. My feelings repeatedly waver between grief over Hilde's demise and joy over all the beautiful things she has meant and that are so evident in the sympathy, the solidarity, the commitment of so many. No less than 150 people are present. Even Roger shows up, shedding his old hostility to a well-meaning handshake. There are about 15 speakers, representing people's organizations like the KMU, KMP, HEAD, Gabriela, CHD and other NGOs from Northern Luzon and Mindanao. Leen and Hilde Verheyen deliver testimonials, and from Belgium we have translated a message of *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld*. Of course Rita and I have to speak, too. Because no one dares to do it for security reasons, we are asked to read the messages of condolence sent by various underground organizations.

The message of the NDF organization of health workers begins with a quote from Mao Zedong's "Serve the People":

All people die but their death can take different meanings, The old Chinese writer, Szuma Chien, said: "Although death befalls everyone without distinction, it can weigh heavier than Mountain Thai or lighter than a feather." Dying for the people is heavier than Mountain Thai, but dying for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather.



In their message, Hilde's friends from Northern Luzon make this comparison:

"We still vividly remember how hard Hilde worked to raise funds for that small clinic in Lacub. Even after the typhoons had made climbing very difficult, Hilde hiked all these mountains to visit the project. The people of Lacub experienced in Hilde genuine solidarity and comradeship. We will never forget how she dedicated her whole life to support those who fight for change. Hilde's death weighs heavier than the Cordillera mountains."

The parangal ends with a love song that we also sang for Ka Berly: "Which love is nobler than giving one's life?" *Anong pag-ibig pa, wala na nga, wala...*

Wednesday, April 5. The exit visa are in order, we can board the plane. We are glad to be able to lie down in the comfortable seats, a total relief after five busy and sleepless days.

### **"You're Still Here!"**

Thursday, April 6. A sad reunion with mama and papa Vanobberghen in Zaventem. And a painful homecoming in Mechelen where we move into Hilde's apartment, use her kitchen, drive her car--but without her around.

Friday, April 7. In the chapel of the crematory we hold a short, beautiful ceremony in the presence of the family and Hilde's close friends.

Saturday, April 8. Hundreds of people come to pay respect to Hilde's ashes. The most moving is the presence of the small Filipino community from Utrecht, which has arrived here in two full cars. I haven't seen this otherwise cheerful gang, headed by Joma Sison, so disconsolate as today.

In the afternoon, about 500 people flock to the *Stadsfeestzaal* in Mechelen. Children offer flowers; personalities, representatives of many organizations where Hilde had worked, friends and family members bring their testimonies and expressions of sympathy.

Ces, a Filipino friend from the Netherlands:

"With our solidarity work in Belgium and Europe we would time and again be in need of good advice, help, criticism, efficiency and perseverance. And a place where we could come to rest, in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Hilde and the warm hospitality of her home stood ready in our times of need. Filipinos who were visiting Europe associate Hilde and Mechelen with the solidarity and the friendship of the PTB and the people of Belgium.



"When we bury and commemorate our martyrs we sing two songs. The first one is *Araw na Lubhang Mapanglaw* (The day of deep sorrow). And then *Sulong mga kasama* (Forward, comrades), a song of struggle, victory and joy. With this we want to say that the death of those who struggle for the emancipation and liberation of the people has not been in vain."

Rita gives a personal testimony about her sister:

"We wish you well, Hilde.

"Do you still remember, Hilde? You were probably 5 years old then and I, 10. We went to school together. Once, upon reaching the paper factory, you had trouble breathing and could not keep pace. I got angry at you: 'Come on, walk faster, or we'll be late!' When ma later said that you were not completely well yet and you had to undergo an operation, I of course felt bad. I had urged you to walk faster. It was at that time that I decided to take better care of you. But that was unnecessary. After the second operation, you were again completely all right.

"Later you never complained about your condition. Many people had no idea about your medical past. And above all, you did not use that as an excuse for not participating in any activity. At home people thought that you would not be able to cope with your medical studies, but you managed to pull it off. Or maybe being a doctor would be too heavy for you. But you did not only become a doctor, you managed to combine this with two or three extra jobs!

"You had already had a few warnings. Once on New Year's day, when the doctors advised you to undergo a 24-hour observation. And during the last few months you would at times be awakened by heart palpitations. It must have been serious, for you decided to consult a cardiologist.

"And do you still remember our first vacation in Switzerland? You must have been about seven and you kept on imitating me the whole time. If I went over there, you would also. If I sat down, you would also. I became really pissed off: "Do you have to do everything that I do? Go your own way!" And you did just that, taking a road less traveled by.

"We became both involved in solidarity work with the Third World. But did you therefore imitate me? Absolutely not.

"If I were to compare it with swimming lessons, I would formulate it this way. I just jumped into the water with my two feet at the same time and my eyes closed. I started beating and thumping, and did not drown.



"You on the other hand got into the water carefully, first with one foot then with the other. You quietly went deeper and when you felt the need, you started learning how to swim. From thereon you went progressing, without stopping.

"How come both of us decided to be involved in a similar commitment? I have no other explanation except that we shared the same mother's milk. Our pa and ma always taught us the difference between good and evil. How important it was to fight for the weakest, for justice, respect to fellow human beings, and to believe in your own capacities. I am certain that our parents have often asked themselves where they could have gone wrong, for we have not made life easier for them. Nevertheless, they always stood beside us whenever problems arose, ready to help. And you and I know that they are proud of us.

"And I, I am also proud of you, Hilde. Of the life that you have led, the decisions you have taken, the consistency that you had in carrying them out. I am also proud of your life as a woman, an independent one. No, you were not married, and you did not have a special someone you could spend all your free time with. What you had were countless friends.

"Do you still remember the afternoon when we had a walk on the cobbled pavement of Brussels' *Grote Markt*? I told you about Bert's and my plan to go to the Philippines. Big plans, only realizable if we had someone in Belgium whom we could trust and rely on. If you could be that person? You said yes then, and we could not have had anyone better.

"We saw each other only once a year, either here or in Manila. But each time we noticed how your responsibilities became heavier, how you became stronger from within, how you felt better about your work. You also became known to a broader circle of people. These last years, I had to introduce myself, even in the Philippines, as: 'Hello, I am the sister of Hilde Vanobberghen'.

"And now? From all the people we know, why you? Why so sudden? The pain I felt upon receiving the news in Manila is hard to describe. It was as if something inside me was torn apart. A stab that totally pierced through me and left a wound that bled. One that has to bleed a lot to be able to heal.

"It is difficult to let go of you, Hilde. It is even hard to stop talking with you. When I stop, you will slip away a little further, always further. Stay for a while and tell me something, give some advice, support, criticism... just like before. But no, you are dead. Your body is no longer here, your ash has been scattered.

"But you know: you're still here! So many people have said so: your body may have left us, but you're still here. Because I have known you and been with



you, you stay inside me, you have become a part of me. A part that I will always bear with me. So many people have known you also, so many people will then bear you with them. They will make sure that you live further. Your dedication, your ideals, your struggles are a part of our dedication, our ideals, our struggles. As long as we remain committed, you will stay alive.

"We wish you well, Hilde! Goodbye!"

### **Hilde's Last Education Session**

April 10. We find Hilde's preparatory notes for the education she gave on the night of her death. Noticeable are the direct-to-the-point style, the clarity of the explanations and her optimism.

"Liberation struggle in the Third World - 30/03/95

"It may appear strange to some that we are going to talk about revolution. Revolutions are after all passé, aren't they? Just look at Eastern Europe, Nicaragua, El Salvador; at China and Vietnam, both in crisis; at Cuba and North Korea, both under pressure from blockades.

"Is revolution still meaningful? Are we not in the era of negotiations, peaceful solutions? Like in El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Palestine?

"A historical perspective is needed to correctly appraise the developments in the world.

#### **"1. WORLD CAPITALISM IN SERIOUS CRISIS**

Despite all appearances and all the triumphant news that we are daily bombarded with.

Behind this so-called unity of the West hides a cut-throat competition between the United States, Europe and Japan.

#### **2. THIRD WORLD CONTINUOUSLY IN DECLINE**

Exploitation and misery reach unprecedented levels.

In figures: between 1982 and 1990 Third World countries have remitted 1,345 billion US dollar to the North to service their debts. In the same period, they received 927 million dollar as development aid. Hence, a transfer of 418 million dollar from South to North, six times the Marshall plan (the aid extended



by the US to Western Europe after the Second World War). The starving people are feeding the fat bellies!

**THIS MUST STOP!**

**3. CAPITALISM IS MORE THAN 500 YEARS OLD,  
SOCIALISM: 75 YEARS, VERY YOUNG SOCIAL PHENOMENON.**

Eastern Europe was in all aspects better off under socialism (health, education...). Those countries have been made to believe that it would be a lot better under capitalism, that it would just take some time before they reached the level of the West.

Illusions! Capitalists will not invite more people to share the pie with them, they already find the pie too small for themselves.

In Eastern Europe mistakes were made, but this does not mean that socialism is good for nothing. One cannot just throw away the gains of socialism.

**4. LIBERATION STRUGGLE IN THE THIRD WORLD, to be explained using the Philippines as example..."**

### **Our KIA Pride**

April 30. Yuri, Mara, Lize, Rita and I fly back to the Philippines.

May 5. For our very last year in the Philippines we have made it ourselves a bit more comfortable. After seven years of taking the jeepney, bus and tricycle, we have decided to buy a second-hand car, a South Korean KIA Pride. Going to the groceries or going out with three children has become a lot simpler. Driving a car in the hellish Manila traffic is nerve-wracking. Today a big disaster has descended upon me: the horn no longer works and this is vital to keep away all those acrobatic jeepney drivers. Especially during rush hours, you can only move forward by blowing your horn all the time. It's good that no traffic rules exist here, or at least, I haven't noticed any.

### **Imelda In Parliament**

May 8. In the parliamentary elections, the ruling party garners 9 of the 12 seats in the Senate and almost 90 percent of the seats in the Lower House. Despite all the talk of a new political culture, old political clans celebrate their reappearance. Children of three former presidents make it to the parliament. Only Bongbong, son of Ferdinand Marcos, failed to win. But with Imelda



winning a parliamentary seat, the Marcos family is still represented. And coup leader Gringo Honasan is now an honorable senator, too.

The media consider that the elections have been relatively free of violence: only 27 dead and about 40 wounded, just on the day of the poll.

### **Bad News From Talaingod**

At the office we receive alarming news about the Ata-Manobo. On April 7, Army helicopters deployed troops to Talaingod. Three days later, they started firing at Manobo villages with heavy weapons. In their attempt to save themselves, the villagers jumped from a ravine. Two women and three children perished.

On April 28, Noel Campilan failed to come home after attending a meeting. Noel is a 27-year-old staffer of a community-based health program in Tagum, and also joined in solidarity actions for the Ata-Manobo. His family and colleagues sounded the alarm. They knew that he had been followed several times by unidentified men. And that he had received anonymous threats because of his alleged connection to the NPA.

From Manila CHD and some human rights organizations sent an investigative team, which came back empty-handed. Press releases and letters to the editors were sent to Philippine newspapers and a dossier was made for Amnesty International. Noel is one of the hundreds of disappeared Filipinos, meaning: probably murdered by the military.

And finally on May 5, my guide and translator Barudong was arrested at a military checkpoint. He is still being held, without a single charge against him.

### **An article from *The Militant***

From Belgium the March issue of the Trotskyite magazine *The Militant* is sent to us, because it contains a remarkable article on the Philippines. It rejoices over the 'split' in the Communist Party of the Philippines as a "break with Mao's erroneous strategy". The "anti-Mao left wing" will within this year "establish a new revolutionary formation". And the photo caption says: "The New People's Army—isolated from the political struggle and even from the peasants".

With mounting amazement I go on reading. Under the Aquino period, *The Militant* writes that "important democratic reforms were achieved, which made the legal organization of the workers' movement possible". When we arrived in Manila at the end of 1987--Aquino was then one year and a half in power--that



same legal workers' movement was the target of government repression and the KMU was almost declared illegal.

The Trotskyites write about the Philippine revolution in the past tense: "The struggle of the CPP and the NPA has been one of the most important in the Third World." *The Militant* quotes the right-hand man of Popoy Lagman, the leader of the breakaway faction in Manila: "The NPA units suffer enormous losses and the guerrilla strategy is in a complete impasse."

The magazine claims further that "party leader Jose Maria Sison, in the best Stalinist tradition, had death sentences imposed on dissidents by 'people's tribunals'". Stating that Jose Maria Sison is the CPP Chairman puts his asylum application and even his life in danger. They are doing exactly the same as the intelligence services in the Philippines, the U.S. and the Netherlands.

And what about the "death sentences imposed on dissidents"? The CPP has come up with dossiers containing criminal and political charges against the five leading factionalists: Lagman, Kintanar, Tabara, Reyes and Rocamora. The charges will be investigated by a people's court. There are therefore no judgments or sentences yet.

The article in *The Militant* concludes that "the formation of a new Marxist party is the crucial task for 1995" and that this is "a welcome development that deserves the support of all socialists at the international level".

### **"A 25-Year-Old Baby"**

Now that Popoy's positions have apparently found an echo internationally, I look for some documents of his group for study. Since early 1994, Popoy has published three basic documents that contain a radical negation of all the basic principles of the Philippine revolution: the semifeudal and semicolonial character of the Philippine society; the national democratic revolution as the response to it; and protracted people's war as the strategy for liberation. In opposition, Popoy says that the Philippines is already a capitalist country, and that therefore the socialist revolution is the order of the day, with armed people's uprising in the cities.

He complains that "after 25 years of protracted people's war we are still not in a position to form a regular army capable of waging a conventional guerrilla war" and that "after 25 years we are still not capable of destroying a single enemy company". "Our people's army", he concludes in a pitying tone, "is a 25-year-old baby". In the autonomy declaration of his CPP-Manila he writes: "Our children have grown up. We want peace. We want to make use of even the smallest possibility for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the rebellion."



It appears that Popoy's impatience to achieve victory--through people's uprisings and large-scale military actions--has been transformed into lack of faith that the revolution can win at all. His words are those of someone who has grown old, not so much in years, but in spirit. Not someone who is tired, but one who is tired of revolution, one who is no longer capable of undertaking the protracted and painstaking organizing work required by the revolution.

During the past elections, the people's organization Sanlakas and the trade union BMP, both belonging to Popoy's camp, supported a number of candidates they deemed progressive. Some of them won, and that made Sanlakas conclude that "it is still possible in this country to achieve reforms through elections".

Nevertheless, just like before, these elections were determined by the proverbial "three G's": guns, goons and gold and signaled the comeback of political dynasties. The first reform that the newly elected officials pushed through was to double their salaries. They found this necessary to respond to all the requests of their constituencies for funeral costs, marriage gifts or other favors.

### **An Unexpected Reunion With Ka Son**

May 18. Five years after meeting him in a guerrilla zone in Bicol, Ka Son's picture is on the front page of all papers. In a military attack on a small NPA camp not far from the coast, he was wounded and taken prisoner. His real name is Sotero 'Teroy' Llamas, according to the Philippine government the highest leader of the CPP and the NPA in the whole of Bicol.

The arrest of this important guerrilla leader happens amid a period of diplomatic activity to revive the peace talks between the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the Philippine government. A preliminary agreement, the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) has already been signed, which provides for the documents of identification of negotiators and advisers of both panels and guarantees their unhampered movement. The NDF says that Teroy is an adviser to the negotiating panel and thus enjoys immunity from arrest. But Ramos and military officials refuse to free their prized catch and suspend the peace talks.

Just like the other 230 political prisoners, Teroy is not recognized as a political prisoner. No less than nine charges are filed against him, from illegal possession of firearms to kidnapping, robbery and murder.

June 10. Teroy's bullet wound is not so serious, but it has been infected because of the unhygienic prison conditions. With Delen of HEAD I go to visit



him in his well-guarded cell in Camp Crame, the headquarters of the military police.

“Aha, I know you,” shouts Ka Son/Teroy as he embraces me.

“Sssh”, I signal to him. I must temper his enthusiasm, for not far from us stands an eavesdropping military man in plainclothes. And the only place where Teroy and I could have possibly met is, of course, in a guerrilla zone in Bicol.

In a hushed voice I ask Teroy about the comrades there.

His wife Rina has been somewhat depressed because of his arrest, he says. “For it’s the first time in 20 years with the guerrilla that they have managed to hit me.” Ka Lina of the medical staff is doing fine. So is Ka Elmo, the one we operated on two years ago, but his task in the fighting unit has become too hard for him; he now works as an organizer. “And to all who want to hear, he says that he has white blood running in his veins”. Roaring laughter.

But why for God’s sake did Teroy wander around in a peripheral NPA camp, and was he not in his well-guarded headquarters in the guerrilla base?

Teroy again laughs heartily: “Aha, that’s a good question.” He explains that he wanted to personally lead the rectification campaign on the lower levels. “I use the principle of leading by example. Like Jaworski. You know him, don’t you?” Jaworski is the hero of Philippine basketball and a playing coach.

“You should know your troops,” continues Teroy. “By going to them and discussing problems together with them, instead of just relying on written reports.”

“The style of work of the Party has radically changed,” says Teroy. “Enough with all those headquarters where dozens of cadres and staff members, deeply esconced in the forest, led the revolution via computer or radio transmissions. The leading cadres are now deployed to Party sections and NPA units and they are just called to come together for important meetings. Enough of the bureaucracy and back to the grassroots!”

### **State Secretary Moreels On A Visit**

September 8. On his way back from the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing, Reginald Moreels, Belgium’s State Secretary for Development Cooperation, pays an unexpected visit to the Philippines. Moreels wants to work with only a few selected countries on which Belgium can concentrate its development aid. The Philippines is one of them.



Moreels is a surgeon and the former chair of Doctors Without Borders (MSF). With this background he expresses his desire to visit an NGO health project. Theo Meyers, the representative of the General Board for Development Cooperation (ABOS) in the Belgian embassy, approaches us to arrange for this.

The Council for Health and Development is more than willing to spend half a day to receive the State Secretary. We find it important to allow our high-ranking visitor to see a piece of the real Philippines, contrary to government propaganda. We find it also useful that Moreels get acquainted with and appreciate the work of CHD and the organizations connected with it. We suggest that the State Secretary visit Parola, a slum area near a garbage dumpsite. A member organization of CHD, Pulso, trains community health workers and gives health education there.

Sunday morning, September 10. Moreels and his entourage come to the office of the Council. Jojo presents the Philippine health situation. He emphasizes that government services receive too limited resources and perform badly and that the private medical sector is inaccessible and unaffordable to the average Filipino.

Mel explains the work of the Community-Based Health Programs. Moreels has never heard about it, even though the ABOS co-finances various projects of that type. I am afraid that we cannot put across the crux of our message in half an hour. Mel also talks about the repression. She uses as example the case of Noel Campilan, the health worker from Mindanao who had been "disappeared" by the military. The State Secretary is impressed.

## Parola

During Christmas season many houses in the Philippines are attractively adorned with lanterns. The typical Filipino Christmas lantern consists of colored paper that is wrapped around a light construction of bamboo. It is called *parola*. Parola is also the name of a slum community in Northern Manila. Less attractive, because Parola looks more and more like Smokey Mountain. The infamous garbage dump there is now closed and Parola is one of those that have replaced it. The difference is that the slums on Smokey Mountain were built gradually as the garbage dump expanded, while Parola is an existing neighborhood beside which a stinking hill of garbage is now being dumped.

The luxurious car of the embassy stops at the entrance of Parola. We enter the area with Moreels and company. Through narrow alleys we reach the small office of the health organization Pulso. Project leader Virgie and her six-member staff welcome us with a merienda of coke and Filipino snacks.



Then Virgie takes us through a number of alleys to the garbage dump, . Along the small houses, huts and shanties of Parola, where thousands of families are shackled up together, noisy trucks arrive 24 hours a day to discharge their stinking load. After the protest of the community residents, a high fence of corrugated iron was erected on one side. A 'solution' that can stop neither the stench nor the noise nor the vermin.

ABOS representative Wellens can hardly believe his eyes--and his nose. "The picture that the international media paint of the Philippines is one of a now problem-free and developed Southeast Asian country. All these years I've been receiving Philippine projects on my desk, but it seems it's only now that I am getting to know this country."

Reginald Moreels stands there shaking his head. He finds the situation in Parola "a sheer disgrace". "Tomorrow morning I am having coffee with President Ramos. I will definitely bring this matter to his attention," he promises.

September 12. We have no idea what the State Secretary and the president have discussed this morning. In any case, Parola is not mentioned in the press reports over Moreels' visit with Ramos. What is reported are the joint action against trafficking in women and the tens of millions of Belgian support for Ramos's sham land reform.

### **A General With The NPA**

October 10. Screaming headlines in all newspapers: Brigadier General Jarque defects to the NPA! Raymundo Jarque is a highly decorated, but now retired general of the Philippine Army. The biggest part of his 33-year career has been spent fighting the New People's Army. He is notoriously known for his human rights violations. In 1989 he was the commander of Oplan Thunderbolt in Negros, which resulted in the displacement of 35,000 people.

Disbelief and doubts all over. Why would such a person join the NPA? It is known that Jarque has trouble with the government, which has accused him of corruption and even murder. In a clandestine press conference, Jarque admits that this is what triggered his decision to go underground, "because I see no more possibility to find justice under the present system".

But he adds: "The repression, corruption and hypocrisy of the successive regimes are an evil that is so deeply ingrained that it can be uprooted only if the existing system is destroyed and replaced by a system of real justice and



democracy for the people. There is no other possibility than to go to the mountains, to side with what is good and just, with the cause of the people."

We wonder how the revolutionary movement will react. Can the "butcher of Negros" just be accepted into its ranks? The NDF issues a statement: it will seriously study if it can accept Jarque. At any rate, this would require a long process of re-education and integration.

Whatever happens, the spectacular defection of Jarque is a morale booster for the NDF and a heavy propaganda defeat for the Ramos regime.

### **The Demolition Of Smokey Mountain**

November 27. For once, Manila's notorious garbage site is featured not only in the international but also in the national newspapers. The government ordered the demolition of a slum community in Smokey Mountain. But the residents protested, they refused to leave. The police used truncheons and guns. There was shooting. A slum resident was killed, a number were injured.

1,400 families are rendered homeless, for Smokey Mountain must give way to a commercial harbor complex, a part of Ramos' development program Philippines 2000. The Belgian firm of the De Nul brothers, suspected of corruption, has won a fat contract for this job.

### **Popoy And Capitalism**

December 26. On the founding anniversary of the CPP, Popoy Lagman gives an interview to the *Inquirer*. His group will put up a workers' bank and an office for legal aid. "We have exchanged arms for calculators and will concentrate more on banks and laws than on revolutionary heroism," declares Popoy.

"We are seeking less bloody methods to effect radical changes in society," he continues. "We are not against capitalism developing in the Philippines, as long as it is not at the expense of the workers."

A Popoy supporter adds that they have founded a new party, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, which has 8,000 members. "This party commits itself to working within the prevailing system, instead of seeking to overthrow it."

It can hardly be clearer: Popoy and his ilk have fitted themselves into the existing system and have bid the revolution goodbye.







## **Chapter Ten**

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### **Che-Che, The New Generation 1996**

#### **On Vacation**

December 1995-January 1996. Before finally returning to Belgium we decide to let our children see something of the Philippines other than the capital Manila. During Christmas vacation we look for a number of friends who are working in the rural areas, in Mindanao and in Negros. A real adventure--but for Filipinos a very normal thing--to travel with three children using public transportation. You cannot think of any form of transportation that we have not used: airplane, tricycle, jeepney, taxi, ferry boat, truck, motorcycle, bus.

On the Zamboanga peninsula, in West Mindanao, we spend a splendidly quiet Christmas on a beach. Coincidentally, there has been no electricity there for two days and for once, we don't mind. Two days later, we pay a visit to Hilde Verheyen, a Belgian working with a local Community-Based Health Program. She will be marrying Aldotz shortly, and we hold a hearty advanced party.

On New Year's eve we head with Hilde and Aldotz to Pitogo, a peasant village where the family of Aldotz runs a small coconut plantation and rice mill. Yuri, Mara and Lize never get tired of looking at goats, carabaos, cows, pigs, cocks and chickens. In the evening, rum is served and some firecrackers are lighted, but the arrival of a New Year does not cause much of a stir here.

We begin the year 1996 with a dive in the Pacific Ocean. Two days later, we take a night ferry to Negros. There we stay with Jan Delbaere, an ABOS staffer who has the unenviable task to put the Belgian support for Ramos' land reform on the right track.

#### **Land Reform As Counterrevolution**

The support forms part of the bilateral agreement that Belgium and the Philippines signed in March 1995. It provides for an annual development aid of 300 million Belgian francs over the period 1997-99; 140 million francs of which is allocated for land reform.

The Philippines' Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL) dates back to 1988, under President Aquino. The aim was to expropriate 10.3 million



hectares of land and distribute these to landless peasants over a ten-year period. From the very start, this law was a case of too little too late. The law has been watered down with many amendments, and what's left of it has been implemented at snail's pace. Eight years into the CARL's implementation, only 30 percent of its objective has been realized. And this mainly concerns the distribution of state lands. Of the private lands that fall under the CARL, which is only one-third of the total, only 19 percent have been distributed so far.

Nevertheless, the World Bank is convinced that the land reform program is doing well. In a recent report it says it will be too expensive for the government to apply CARL on the remaining private estates, for high compensation has to be paid to the landlords. It suggests that the unequal distribution of land just be allowed to continue and calls instead for more investments in raising agricultural productivity.

The World Bank report is music to the ears of the landowners and, of course, of the Ramos regime whose core support comes to a great extent from the feudal land nobility. Consistent with those recommendations, the land reform is now "attuned to the market". In place of the integral implementation of the CARL, the focus now is on the so-called Agrarian Reform Communities (ARC). These are 264 selected villages where land reform is effectively pushed and where rural development is undertaken with small-scale projects geared towards raising productivity, marketing and health care. That way, 264 small, isolated islets of "rural development" are created in an ocean of landlessness and exploitation.

Belgium funds 11 ARCs in Negros Oriental, Bohol and Cebu, provinces where land reform fares worse than the national average: respectively, 25, 28 and 13 percent of the 10-year plan has been implemented. In an ABOS synthesis report, the expressed objective of the project is stated as "to fight poverty and to ensure social peace". By helping the peasants keep their heads just above water, "social peace" can be assured by diverting the peasants' attention from the revolutionary alternative.

### **Triple People's Protest**

From January 1 the Filipino consumer must have to contend with the further erosion of his purchasing power. The government has decided to increase by 10 percent the value-added tax on a wide range of products and services.

On January 2 the oil price is increased, and one month later again. Even the price of butane gas, which is used by every Filipino family for cooking, has been hiked. Electricity and water rates also skyrocket. Consumer products follow suit.



Things have been moving on the political scene, too. Ramos wants to have a legal basis for further repression through the Anti-Terrorism Bill. "Terrorism" is broadly defined: it also includes legal and non-violent acts that "would create fear among the people" or that "undermines confidence in the government", like protest actions and demonstrations. The death penalty awaits those convicted of "terrorism". "Terrorist organizations" are outlawed, even membership and support to such organizations is punishable. The authorities are sanctioned to bug telephones, to check bank accounts and make arrests without warrants.

The reaction of the people's movement against the regime's triple whammy is intense. For weeks Manila and other big cities of the Philippine archipelago are witness to massive protest actions, the biggest since Ramos came to power. The health workers belonging to HEAD form a strong, noisy and creative bloc within the demonstrations. We even hold our own demonstration. With 150 health workers riding a jeepney with loud speakers, we move through the streets of the capital center.

The protests have not prevented expansion of the value added tax and the oil price hike. But Ramos is forced to temporarily shelve his anti-terrorism plans.

### **Southern Mindanao**

February. It has been a while since I was with the guerrillas. I want to see first-hand how the rectification movement is faring in the field. I get in touch with Ella and pose my question. She appears to have the right channels to arrange something for me: Southern Mindanao.

At the end of next month we are setting off for Belgium. Considering that I am on my way out of CHD, getting a ten-day leave is not that difficult.

February 8. Early morning we leave Davao City by bus. I am accompanied by two city comrades who will undergo integration in the guerrilla zone for three months. And there is Juan, an Argentinean comrade who is on a visit to the Philippines. I act as interpreter, for Juan can only speak broken English and, of course, no Tagalog.

We transfer to a smaller bus traveling to a smaller municipality in the interior. A young man with a motorbike awaits us there. This time the four of us are sitting on just one machine: two at the back and one sitting sideways on the gasoline tank, sandwiched between the arms of the driver. It takes us three and a half hours to negotiate mountainous, rocky and muddy roads. Definitely not a comfortable ride, but the first time indeed that I enter a guerrilla zone without



having to hike for a single meter. The trip ends at a small river, where we take a small banca to reach the village at the other side, where we are to meet the NPA.

### **Ka Paking**

On a small hill just outside the village center a man is closely watching our arrival. I recognize him at once. It is Ka Paking, the leading figure in the video-documentary *Green Guerrillas*, which was shot here last year by Rod Prosser, a film maker from New Zealand. The film describes the integration of the NPA with the lumad, the indigenous people of Mindanao, and the struggle of the guerrillas against deforestation.

Ka Paking shakes our hands. I immediately feel warmth towards this man, with his disarming gaze, broad smile and his firm moustache. In T-shirt and slippers he is not distinguishable from the villagers. But he is the secretary of the Party committee in this guerrilla front.

The front guerrilla unit is staying a few days in this village to take a little rest after a tactical offensive, says Paking. The local population does not mind. They have been involved in the revolution for years, through an organizing group (OG, the second stage in the organizing work).

### **San Antonio**

February 9.. With my Argentinian companion Juan, I stroll around the village and chat here and there. The village, let's call it San Antonio, is home to 300 to 400 families, 40 of which live in the center of the village. The inhabitants are predominantly Mandaya, a lumad people, but they are to a large extent assimilated. They are farmers (rice, maize, sweet potato and copra) and collectors (abaca fibres and rattan lathes). The land is government property, but through customary law the Mandaya have the usufruct of the land.

San Antonio shows signs of a certain degree of prosperity. Most of the houses are made of wood, some even have zinc roofing. There's no electricity, but there are water works that lead to two common faucets. The primary school, where we drop by to say hello to the schoolchildren and their teachers, has three teachers for six classes. An assistant pastor comes every Sunday to say mass at the chapel. Juan and I actually discover a health center. But a villager tells us that the center gets a midwife only three days a month. She is fairly shared by three surrounding villages.

February 10. It is Sunday and I savor the peaceful village life. The teenagers are playing basketball on a square, women with small children in tow are going to mass. With Vergel, I head to the river for a refreshing dip. Vergel



is 16 years old and the eldest son of Ka Paking. It is school vacation and the young lad has found an ideal pass time: in the guerrilla zone he learns from his father the job of an NPA fighter and in the meantime he befriends the local beauties.

Vergel and I get to talk with three young copra sellers who are waiting for a ferry banca. They have five sacks of copra, each weighing 50 kilos. That has cost them a week's work. They can sell their wares for 300 pesos per sack, but transporting them will cost them 150 pesos per person. Simple arithmetic tells us that our three friends' one week of hard work will yield them 1,050 pesos, 350 pesos each or 50 pesos per day. And they can in fact be lucky, because there is no longer a big landowner here who could demand two-thirds of the harvest.

### **Fighting Disease Together**

As soon as the residents find out that there is a doctor in the village, they lose no time seeing me at Paking's house. A peasant says admiringly: "Your organization must be really strong and powerful, for you are the only one who can bring a doctor here." The NPA unit has a pair of medics. I decide to connect the medical consultations to a theory-and-practice class for the NPA health workers.

Two patients need minor surgery: a man with a gigantic abscess on his arm, that causes him lymphangitis and high fever, and a woman with an ugly, advanced tumor on her scalp. We make an inventory of the available equipment. As I feared, we have a rather poor supply. After a comprehensive briefing for the medics we start our work.

The operating quarter is perfect: grunting pigs under the house, crowing roosters on the roof, guitar-playing guerrillas in the next room and about ten kasama and masa observing curiously. Eyes pop out when they see the enormous amount of pus I squeeze out from the abscess.

Removing the tumor from the scalp is more difficult. We have no real needle holder, no strong and sharp needle and no good lighting. The patient and her husband, who is sitting beside her, holding her hand, are tremendously happy when it is over. Doctor, medics and patients take a hearty merienda. We really deserve that.

### **Guerrilla Diplomacy**

Ka Paking is barely 39, but he functions in this territory as some sort of natural authority. He receives visitors the whole day. Two leaders of the local organization of the lumad drop by to seek advice on their struggle against a



logging company. The secretary of an underground organizing group in the village arrives to report. A villager has a financial problem: his wife has to be brought to the hospital to give birth. Is it possible for him to borrow a circular saw for a week and, with Ka Paking's recommendation letter, sell chopped wood to the logging firm Candelaria? It is approved. That is a special favor, for the NDF is holding negotiations with the same firm over a phasing-out of its operations. Two representatives of the company come to discuss that with Ka Paking.

We even receive representatives of a Japanese-Australian multinational. They are here to ask the NPA for permission to do pit mining in the area. They bring with them gifts: kilos of pork, fish, cookies and a bottle of rum. The whole guerrilla unit is happy about the meat, fish and cookies. But we do not touch the whiskey; alcohol has been strictly forbidden since the rectification movement. A tough ordeal for Juan, our Latino friend.

Ka Paking deals with his visitors with flair and flexibility. The fact that representatives of multinationals come here to talk with the NPA is testimony to the strength of the guerrillas. But Paking is conscious of the relativity of that strength, in a period that the revolution is still in the strategic defensive. To impose a total ban on these multinationals would be difficult to enforce. He carefully deliberates, formulates conditions and modalities, and negotiates diplomatically.

Paking tells Juan and me how the guerrillas deal with the logging issue. The NDF-Mindanao has declared a total logging ban. Comparing it with the revolutionary agrarian reform, this may be called the maximum program. But wanting to have one's cake and eat it all at once is not possible. Aware of the local balance of forces, the level of consciousness of the masses and the availability of alternative sources of employment and income, there is also a minimum program on logging.

It is that minimum program that is being applied in this guerrilla front at the moment. Through negotiations the NPA has arrived at a *modus vivendi* with the most important logging company in the area, Candelaria. The company may still produce at a highly reduced capacity, either in a strictly designated area or by buying the tree stems from individual wood-cutters who have no alternative source of income yet. For its part, the company has committed itself to allow no government troops in its terrain and to lend some services to the NPA, like transporting the sick and wounded.

The environmental effect of Ka Paking's cautious approach has not been inconsequential: Candelaria's production has decreased from 4,000 to 900 cubic meters per month. Paking assures us that Candelaria would eventually have to



shut down its operations, or go somewhere else where, at a given time, again a legal struggle with indigenous peoples and NGOs eventually awaits them, and a fight with the NPA.

## Front 15

February 14. Juan and I ask Ka Paking about the situation in this guerrilla front. It is called F15, Front Number 15, and covers large parts of three provinces. In the southern Mindanao region there are no less than eight guerrilla fronts.

The NPA has renewed its presence in F15 since four years ago. In 1985 this front had totally fallen apart. The military adventurism of the NPA at that time allowed the enemy to carry out a "people's war in reverse" and make the population turn against the revolution. The Front's NPA company was forced to a defensive position. Through setbacks and desertions, the number of combatants was reduced from 100 to 30. The regional Party leadership decided to temporarily leave Front 15.

In 1992 a guerrilla team from Front 18 was sent to re-open Front 15, this time employing a radically new approach. In the first year the NPA spent most of its time on education and organizing work. That meant attending first and foremost to the basic needs of the local population, like health care. After the barefoot surgeons of the NPA performed a number of operations, the revolution managed to secure a foothold again in the area. "Medical is magical," laughs Ka Paking.

After barely four years of new-style organizing work, Front 15 is now one of the strongest in southern Mindanao. "I can hardly believe it, the speed at which the revolution is progressing here," beams Ka Paking. The NPA has grown tenfold since 1992. A quicker expansion is possible, since more new recruits are presenting themselves. "But we want to screen new recruits carefully and deploy them for a time to political organizing work before we enlist them in the people's army," says Ka Paking.

## Che

Juan and I continue the discussion in our room. Juan compares Ka Paking's style of work to that of his countryman Che Guevara. I have given Juan a copy of Che's *Bolivian Diary*, a Spanish edition of which I had bought in Nicaragua. Juan says he had found it difficult before to understand why Che, such a great revolutionary, failed in Bolivia. "But if I compare Ka Paking's story with Che's diary, I see an important difference. For the NPA, education and organizing work among the masses is essential for the revolution to succeed. Che failed to



lay this basis in Bolivia and was therefore forced in a one-sidedly military, and therefore vulnerable, mode of guerrilla war.

### **Che-che**

In the front guerrilla unit there are two girls with wonderful dark, long hair. Che-che (named after Che Guevara) and Jeanette are sisters. After they return from the river I sit down beside them. Jeanette is rather shy, but the younger Che-che answers comfortably. The girls come from a family of 12. Seven of them have joined the NPA, but three of them have died in the struggle. Che-che, 17, has just joined the NPA and would like to be trained as a medic. Jeanette, 23, is married to an NPA commander in this unit. Their brother Boyet, 26, is the political officer of this unit. Che-che points at him, laughing: "That short guy with a moustache that is trying his hand at a basketball game over there." Sister Aylene, 28, finally, is also a medic and the wife of Ka Julius, the NPA leader of the whole Front 15. Aylene has just given birth and is on leave for a couple of months.

February 16. A lean, elderly man wearing eyeglasses is on a visit. He's the father of Che-che, Jeanette and Boyet. Ka Paking beckons to me: "That's an interesting man. An opportunity for you to interview the entire revolutionary clan." I ask the old Peping--that's how he's called--if he would like to share the family's chronicle. He is glad to do it. He calls his three children.

The family is from a nearby village, where Peping was a poor corn farmer. It was 20 years ago when the kasama passed through the village in the deep of the night. Everyone knew that they had to keep mum about it, otherwise that would mean their death. In 1982 organizing work started at Peping's barrio. He and his wife Maria were among the first contacts in the Barrio Liaison Group. In the next two years, four of their children joined the guerrillas, two as fighters and two as medics.

Difficult years followed. Organizing work in their barrio made good progress and Peping became a member of the local Party branch. But soon enough he was exposed. After being tipped off to the police, he was detained for a day. On different occasions he received death threats. He had to stay out of sight more and more. When government troops raided their village, Peping's house was one of the first targets. In the same period two of the children died in the struggle. It was very difficult for Peping and Maria to continue with their commitment.

But when the third son died in 1989, Boyet, Jeanette and Aylene stood ready to take over. Giggling, Jeanette and Che-che relate that another sister also joined the NPA a year after, "but she managed to stay for only a year". Then



Che-che adds, with a sigh: "All in all there are still five of the 12 children who are not with the NPA. But there's still hope. The two youngest, 11 and 7 years old, are talking about it already."

I ask Peping about his precarious security situation. Since 1993 he has dared to return to his village. Every now and then he even drinks with the soldiers in the detachment and discusses cockfighting with them. With the help of the movement, Peping has been able to uplift his economic situation a bit. He has bought one-and-a-half hectares of land. "And I am proud that most of our children have finished primary school. Some of them have even attended a few years of secondary school."

Peping, Boyet, Jeanette and Che-che totally agree that they form a happy family. They support each other through and through, although they see each other only once or twice a year, on occasions like this, when the NPA passes by a neighboring barrio for a few days.

### **A Student On A Visit**

That evening we have yet other visitors, an armed propaganda unit. With the unit is a young student from Davao City, Lea. She is going to stay with the NPA for six months. I cannot suppress a smile during Lea's rambling chatter: "In school we only get theories, but the practice is here, among the masses. I've never learned anything at school, so I am here to learn from the peasants. In the city, you see nothing but buildings, you wonder where the masses are. They are of course in the countryside! My parents are bourgeois, they kept me in a cage. So I ran away from home."

In any case, the girl has run away with a beautiful knapsack, smooth jogging pants and expensive Nikes. The young Vergel, Ka Paking's son, interrupts her: "So, you come here to run away from home. I come here precisely to find my home." Juan and I wink at each other. The simple country lad puts the city lass in her proper place. But I also have sympathy for the girl. It's no laughing matter for a young female student to join the guerrillas for six months!

### **The Story Of Rhyme Petalcorin**

February 17. My last day with the NPA, and storyteller Ka Paking is at it again. This time he talks about the history of the New People's Army in the region, which traces back to the early '70s, more than 25 years ago.

Following the First Quarter Storm, the student rebellion of 1970, progressive students of Davao City started establishing the Kabataang



Makabayan (KM, Patriotic Youth). That was the national democratic student organization set up in 1964 by Jose Maria Sison.

One of those students was Rhyme Petalcorin. After Marcos declared martial law in September 1972, Rhyme and a number of other students went underground in Mainit, a municipality in the province of Davao del Norte. From the revolutionary propaganda they recalled that the NPA was to be found in the mountains, and there are indeed mountains around Mainit. With neither money nor weapons, the activists went to look for the guerrillas. Little did they know that the NPA had at that time established a foothold nowhere but in the forests of Isabela, in northern Luzon, at the opposite end of the Philippine archipelago.

Rhyme and his companions trekked from one barrio to another doing political work. The local population called them *walang sapatos*, the barefoot ones. They kept asking themselves why they didn't encounter any NPA guerrillas. Until it dawned upon them that they themselves constituted the NPA here!

With daring attacks against security guards of a banana plantation and police agents, Rhyme and his comrades managed to arm themselves little by little. But for want of military experience, a number of kasama were killed. It was only after one year that they were able to establish contact with the NPA in Northern Luzon. They could join a military training in the former mecca of the NPA, in Isabela. In 1974 Paking, a young, unorganized activist, got to know Rhyme Petalcorin. A year after, Rhyme, who was then the commander of the NPA's Front 2, was killed in action.

But the revolution went on advancing in the region. With the publication of the document *Our Urgent Tasks*, the NPA now had a handbook for organizing at its disposal. Then everything went very rapidly. In the period between 1979 and 1981, tactical offensives increased tremendously. People's organizations were mushrooming--secret peasant associations, revolutionary barrio committees, local Party branches. Both inside and outside the guerrilla zone, the mass movement was spreading fast. Until the errors of military adventurism would spoil everything.

### **Victories Turn Into Defeats**

Ka Julius takes over the storytelling. As NPA leader of Front 15, he has a long military experience. Julius joined the NPA in the late '70s, which at that time was operating in small units and would only launch tactical offensives after having held comprehensive consultations with the masses. Which enemy targets did they want to be attacked? What was their capacity to bear enemy counterattacks? How would these affect the work of their organizations?



In 1980 and 1981 Ka Julius underwent a rigid military training under Romulo Kintanar, who would later become the NPA's chief of staff. Kintanar gave the impetus for platoon-sized NPA formations in Mindanao. After a year of successful guerrilla offensives, they were transformed into companies.

Julius was part of the first NPA company in Mindanao, which was set up in 1982. Soon enough they became the biggest company on the whole island: 150 men and women with 127 rifles. In 1983-'84 they scored spectacular victories. Some detachments of the government army gave up without a fight. Especially the 37<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of the government army suffered disrepute for surrendering. Within the NPA that unit became known as the "hands-up battalion".

But the military coin has another side, as Ka Julius explains. To be able to have sufficient personnel, the criteria for recruitment were lowered. The requisite that a new recruit should first work with a mass organization for six months was set aside.

Julius' unit was carrying out military action once a month. Consequently, there was hardly any time left for mass work. The company got its own budget, so it could provide for its own needs and not rely on the masses anymore.

In an attempt to assure political leadership of the burgeoning people's army, the best cadres were uprooted from grassroots work and were deployed to the military formations. The smaller local guerrilla units, which primarily do organizing work, were consigned to the background. They became incapable of defending the guerrilla zone against enemy attacks. And because of their political debilitation, the quality and quantity of the people's organizations also caved in.

When the total war of the Aquino regime brought terror to the countryside, in the form of fanatic religious sects, paramilitary CAFGUs and massive military operations, NPA setbacks started to pile up. The lowest point was the big NPA offensive of 1989, which resulted in the loss of two entire guerrilla fronts.

Relying on my own insights into the *Reaffirm* document, I share with Julius and Paking my observations from other regions where the militarist error had also played a part. In Bicol, Ka Louie was also counting exclusively with military figures when he talked of strategic stalemate in the people's war: every front a company, every region a battalion.



In Negros in 1989, I saw how the New People's Army was transformed into a regular army: big companies with heavy firearms, military drill exercises and a parade in uniform. That was most probably at the expense of mass organizations and guerrilla units at the grassroots. In any case, the guerrilla zone of Southwestern Negros was almost wiped out by Operation Thunderbolt, a massive government military operation launched following the possibly thoughtless NPA attack in Candoni.

The one-sided emphasis on the military aspect was also noticeable in our medical work. When Oplan Thunderbolt was set loose, the medics in Negros had just been well trained for war surgery. But the irony is that they ended up, not treating wounded guerrillas in a field hospital, but providing medical care to displaced children in evacuation centers who were suffering from measles and diarrhea. And for that, the NPA health workers had not been trained.

The conclusion Julius, Paking, Juan and I arrive at is: armed struggle, certainly, but only within the framework of a genuine people's revolution, whereby the political aspects are always at the forefront.

February 18. Juan and I bid farewell to Paking and Julius, Vergel and Cheche and the other kasama. They themselves are also set to go; new tasks, new challenges await the NPA. The trip back runs as smoothly and safely as our trip going there. The same night we are already back in Manila.

I rush to the bedroom as soon as I reach home. Yuri, Mara and Lize are sleeping soundly. Then I start telling Rita my guerrilla stories, about my very last experience with the New People's Army of the Philippines.

### **Neneng Under Fire**

February 23. In the early morning ten heavily armed military men raid the clinic of Dr. Fe "Neneng" Mamon in Iloilo, on Panay island. They accuse Neneng of having treated and hidden a regional leader of the Communist Party. In the presence of Neneng's children, they search the house, although they don't have a search warrant. They find no one and have to slink away empty-handed.

The fax message that HELP-Panay sends to the Council gives the real reason why Neneng is under fire from the military. HELP has recently become active among the indigenous Sulodnon population. These people are protesting against government's military exercises in a military domain that extends to their ancestral land. The military exercises have already forced some frightened Sulodnons to leave their homes.



## Prince Philip In The Philippines

Early-March. A Belgian trade mission headed by Prince Philip visits the Philippines. Tony Vandeputte, director of the Federation of Belgian Enterprises, is also part of the delegation that consists of some 80 businessmen.

For the occasion, the Belgian Service for Foreign Trade has published a glossy brochure. We read that "the establishment of export processing zones is a good stimulant" for Belgian investments. Interested parties are assured that "making contacts is easy. The Philippine partners speak English and are very receptive to new Western products". The brochure also says that whoever wants to do business there "should be involved in projects financed by the World Bank and the Asian Development bank". Indeed, these projects have already paved the way for the multinationals in the framework of Ramos' Philippines 2000.

The trade mission is a success. The dredging company De Nul clinches one more contract to build a coastal road to the port of Manila. The Kredietbank will open a Philippine branch and the BBL bank will issue credit access for Philippine exports.

Afterwards, Karel Pinxten, the Belgian Minister of Agriculture and Small and Medium-Scale Companies (KMO), signs an agreement for repair works on Manila's aboveground metro. The agreement contains a soft loan of 131.6 million Belgian francs. That way, Belgium hopes to create the necessary goodwill to clinch the reparation contract for the Belgian company ACEC. Meanwhile, the Bombardier Eurorail and Tractebel Engineering are also coveting the contract for building a second metro line in Manila.

I strongly doubt if the series of visits by the Belgian delegations to the Philippines is coincidental. The ministry for development cooperation paves the way first and then come the ministry of foreign trade and the KMO's to cash in on the business for the Belgian bosses.

## Despedida

March 15. Filipinos are good in Christmas parties, but still better in farewell parties, the *despedida*. Today is the first in the series, organized by CHD. Rita and I are not especially eager about it. Not only because we do not want to say goodbye to the Philippines, but also because we don't want to be the center of attention. But there is no way out.

It is a nice affair. Many friends from the people's organizations and progressive NGOs attend. They bring out serious and not so serious speeches,



poems, songs and theater. Romy Quijano, our pharmacologist friend and chair of HEAD, has written a poem for us:

*Salamat*, thanks

Noong una'y hindi ko pansin  
Ang makita kayo sa mga pagtitipon  
Sa wari ko'y katulad din  
Ng ibang bisitang hindi naglalaon

Tahimik kayong nakikinig  
Umimik man parang pipit  
Ni hindi ko nga agad natandaan  
Bert at Rita pala ang inyong pangalan

Nguni't sa paglipas ng mga panahon  
Sa pakikibakang tuloy ang pagsulong  
Ang tinig ninyo na tila maliit  
Sa puso nami'y tumimo't sumagitsit!

Malumanay ang dating' ng katwiran na matalas  
Kay-inam kung kausap, sa wika ay matatas  
Sa panuri ay malalim, sa panulat ay magaling  
Sa pinansya kung kailangan ay naaasahan din

Sa inyong pagkilos inyong ipinakita  
Ang tunay na larawan ng pakikipag-isa  
Puspusang lumahok sa gawaing masa  
Mahigpit na nagtaguyod ng matwid na linya

Pati na mga supling ng inyong pag-ibig  
Dito na isinilang, dito na nag-kabibig  
Anong patunay pa ng wagas na pagtangkilik  
Kung ang salin ng lahi dito na nakatitik

Tunay n'yong niyakap ang aping sambayanan  
Dinilig n'yo ng pag-asa ang Bayang lumalaban  
Isinabuhay ninyo ang tunay na diwa  
Gawaing pangkalusugan na mapagpalaya!

Ngayon nga'y oras na ng inyong paglisan  
Ano pa nga ba ang marapat na aming sukli naman  
Sa dulot n'yong tunay na pandaigdigang kapatiran  
Kundi ang SALAMAT, taos-pusong SALAMAT!



In order to evade the classical goodbye speech, Rita has thought of having a quiz: *All you've always wanted to know about Rita and Bert but never dared to ask*. The truth about my "allergy to seafood" is divulged, and elicits a storm of dismay. The real cause of Rita's handicap is revealed, but one way or the other, everyone seems to be in the know already. That is clearly not the case with our question on which contraceptive methods did Rita and I not use during our eight years in the Philippines. Hilarity all around.

The KMU choir Tambisan closes the despedida with a number of revolutionary songs.

March 21. Also the comrades in the UG, the underground movement, have prepared a despedida. Saying goodbye to Lean and Andrea, to Ella and the other kasama is all but easy for Rita and me. Because it is from them that we have learned the most and it is they whom we have loved the most. Because it was they with whom I have experienced the most. And because we are not sure if we will ever see them again.

### **David Against Goliath**

March 22. A short news item in *Today* catches my attention:

"CATEEL, Davao Oriental - For the first time in a century, hundreds of the Mandaya tribe have come out of the interior. They stormed the streets of this remote coastal town to demand the cancellation of a tree-plantation project of the biggest paper producer in Asia.

"About 500 members of the organization Yagatibo (United Mandayas for the Defense of Ancestral Lands) demonstrated with streamers against the IFMA 28, the logging application granted to the Paper Industries Corporation of the Philippines (PICOP)."

The Ata-Manobo against Alsons in Talaingod, the Mandaya against PICOP in Cateel. The indigenous people are rising up against the powers that be. David against Goliath. And just as David had his sling, the lumads turn to their bow and arrow. And to more than that, for the Filipino people have built up an extremely effective weapon: the New People's Army.

### **To The Other Side Of The World**

March 24. Our little house is drearily empty, our household effects are partly given out, partly packed and sent to Belgium by boat. We bid the neighbors goodbye. Our CHD friends bring us to the airport.



Yuri, Mara and Lize, who have never known anything other than the Philippines. Rita and I, who have probably spent the best years of our life here: it is all over.

In the car we sing the farewell song of Joey Ayala, which is also popular among the guerrillas:

Ang pag-ibig natin ay  
Walang hanggang paalam  
At habang magkalayo  
Papalapit pa rin ang puso  
Kahit na magkahiwalay  
Tayo ay magkasama  
Sa magkabilang dulo ng mundo

Our love  
Knows no farewell  
And while far from each other  
Our hearts stay close to one another  
Even if we part ways  
We remain together  
On both sides of the world



## Epilogue

One and a half years have passed since we exchanged the Philippines for Belgium. But can we forget the Philippines? We cannot. Rita receives quite a number of Filipinos and Filipinas for consultation at *De Sleutel* [The Key], the clinic of *Geneeskunde voor het Volk* [Medical Aid for the People]. By word of mouth, Rita gets to be known in the Filipino community of household helpers, most of whom are without legal permits, as the only doctor in Brussels who speaks Tagalog.

In my work with *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* [Medical Care for the Third World], I continue to be closely involved with Philippine projects for liberating health care. I have also taken over the task of Hilde Vanobberghen to maintain contact with Jose Maria Sison and the NDF in Utrecht.

Our children are now staying in a French-Turkish area and have practically forgotten Tagalog. But when Filipinos come to visit or stay with us, they can again practice it a little. This week we had a delegate from KMU with us. Ric is a strike leader at Nestlé-Manila, where the workers struggle against a take-over, restructuring, dismissals and repression directed at militant trade unionists.

Last year we had Duque and Daday as guests. As members of the women's organization GABRIELA, they are involved in projects for streetchildren. They came to testify regarding the problem of child prostitution, at a time when all of Belgium was in an uproar over the abduction, forced prostitution and murder of young girls.

We also had two very special guests. Sotero "Teroy" Llamas, alias Ka Son, was in Europe for a few days as political adviser of the NDF panel on the peace negotiations. After more than a year in prison, Ramos had to release him. Teroy related stories about the situation in Bicol, about Rina-with-the-beautiful-voice and about Ka Lina, the comrade in charge of health care. His stories were always punctuated with his roaring laughter.

Our surprise was even bigger when General Jarque came to visit us. After his spectacular move of joining the revolutionary movement, he apologized to the masses for his role in Operation Thunderbolt and spent sixteen months sharing their life in an NPA guerrilla front. Thereafter he was requested by the NDF to be an adviser in the peace negotiations. He too flew to Europe to participate in the peace negotiations and took the occasion, with his wife and son, to visit Paris, Waterloo and Brussels as tourists. He left a thank-you card: "We shall persevere until final victory. Ka Ray."



We continue to regularly receive bits of news on people and projects from our friends in the Council and Gabriela. Also sad news: Pina died in October 1996, after a long and courageous struggle against cancer.

We of course also follow the political developments in the Philippines. There was a massive rally on September 21, 1997, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marcos' martial law. Cardinal Sin officiated at the mass, with the red banners of Bayan and KMU present. The demonstration was directed at President Ramos who wants to amend the constitution to facilitate economic liberalization and prolong his stay in office. Everyone was united against this *Charter Change*, creatively abbreviated the Filipino way to *Cha-cha*.

What has happened further to the Rejects? Popoy Lagman is now the president of the BMP, the anti-KMU trade union, but he has not succeeded in getting his new Revolutionary Workers' Party off the ground. The urban guerrilla ABB has expelled Popoy from its ranks. Or was it the other way around, as Popoy himself claims?

Also those who advocated the "third way" have achieved nothing. Nothing is heard anymore from their "new left formation". They busy themselves with NGO projects, some of which are supported by the World Bank.

The prize for the nicest postrevolutionary career undoubtedly goes to Romulo Kintanar, the former chief of staff of the NPA. On December 17, 1996, he took his oath as member of the government party Lakas-NUCD. He wants "to make the people in the countryside accept Ramos' program of modernizing agriculture".

In the meantime, the revolutionary movement is moving forward again. According to the Philippine Department of Defense, the number of villages in which the NPA was active in 1996 increased by almost 5% compared to the year before. The membership of the guerrilla movement also increased. In the first half of 1997, the growth was even more significant: almost 12% more villages under the influence of the NPA, and various new guerrilla fronts were opened. The military is compelled to admit that the NPA has won back much of the terrain it had lost earlier.

The latest anniversary statements of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army state that, after five years of rectification, the movement has been strengthened ideologically, politically and organizationally.



Therefore the call is issued to once again intensify the armed liberation struggle, whenever the capabilities and the circumstances permit. *Mabuhay!*

*Bert De Belder*

*Brussels, Belgium, October 4, 1997*

Two years later, I don't feel that the experiences and the analysis recorded in this book need much revision or extensive additions. From what we hear, read and see, the conditions in the Philippines have remained basically unchanged, and the developments we have described continue to take their course.

The soldier Ramos has given way to the moviestar Erap, but that doesn't mean that exploitation and oppression would have become any less real, what with the further integration of the Philippine economy into the capitalist world market, the return of the Marcos cronies, the regime's renewed efforts to institute a *Cha-Cha*, the curtailing of press freedom, the continuing human rights violations and the unilateral termination of the peace talks with the National Democratic Front.

From all indications, the national democratic movement continues to advance. Not only in the number of barangays controlled or influenced by the revolutionary movement, or in the number of tactical offensives launched by the New People's Army, but also in the breadth and depth of the mass movement in the cities. Testimony to the latter are the large anti-Erap rallies held on August 20 and on September 21, in which even Cardinal Sin and Corazon Aquino participated.

As far as I know, all our friends and comrades mentioned in the book are still there, still active in the movement. Except for two. It was with deep grief and anger that I learned of the death of Ka Paking, Godofredo Guimbaolibot by his real name. On August 2, 1999, Ka Paking, his companion Ka JR and two mining employees were brutally tortured and murdered by the military, after they had been arrested at a checkpoint near the town of Mawab in Southern Mindanao. Earlier, towards the end of 1998, Bob Ortaliz, former Secretary General of the KMU and former President of the National Federation of Sugar Workers, passed away after a lingering illness.

That same month, another item of bad news reached us by e-mail. On August 28, the slum area of Apelo Cruz burned down to the ground. Apelo was the community where Rita had worked with the women's association to train and develop health workers. The small clinic and the tiny houses of the



community health workers were all razed. The suspicion is that a greedy project developer may have been behind the fire.

As can be seen from these two recent events, the Philippine saga remains one of exploitation of the common *tao*, and oppression of whoever dares to resist. Fortunately, in the Philippines the ranks of the "bold and daring" continue to increase!

*Bert De Belder*

*Brussels, 6 October 1999*

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### About the Authors

On October 27, 1987, Doctors Bert de Belder and Rita Vanobberghen left for the Philippines. From their small apartment in Manila, they worked with the legal people's organizations and the underground armed resistance. They were called *kasama*, the Filipino word for comrade. In March 1996, they returned to Belgium with their three children and a wealth of experience forever etched in their memories. **KASAMA** is the story of those eight years in the thick of the Filipino people's struggle for national and social liberation.

**RITA VANOBBERGHEN** did part of her internship as a medical student in Bolivia. After graduation, she went to Central America with Doctors without Borders, but soon found herself working with the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador's liberated zones. She was severely wounded by helicopter gunfire and had to be repatriated. This only strengthened her commitment -- a commitment which she continues to practice up to this day by working as a general medical practitioner in *De Sleutel*, a community clinic working for *Geneeskunde voor het Volk* in Brussels. Most of her patients are migrant workers (Filipinos and other nationalities), refugees and undocumented people. *Geneeskunde voor het Volk* supports their struggle for regularization, jobs and democratic rights.

**BERT DE BELDER** had a part of his internship as a medical student in Chile, where he experienced the first broad mass protests against the Pinochet dictatorship. He also worked in the solidarity with the peoples of El Salvador and Palestine before he left for the Philippines. Today he works for a non-governmental organization, *Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld* and the *Anti-Imperialistische Bond (AIB)* in Belgium. Both organizations actively support the people's struggle in the Third World.